

# Timothy Smith's *Circulatio*: a Misnomer?

Quoting from Timothy Smith's theory containing his definition of *circulatio* as posted at:

<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~tas3/pubs/circ/circulatio.html>

I have selected two important paragraphs that are very helpful in understanding his theory as based upon the supporting evidence provided by the author:

>>Word paintings, integral to the 18th-century conception of *Affekt*, were not limited to literal representations of text, feelings, moods, or emotions. In the hands of masterful composers, such musical morphemes were often conjoined with seemingly unrelated texts to create what this author calls *tropes*--symbols of great power and force. Johann Sebastian Bach's contemporaries, Kircher and Walther, identify the *circulatio* as a musical symbol for the rising and setting of the sun. Bach himself used this figure (remarkably similar to his name in tones) as a symbol for the cross and Christ. It is the purpose of this paper to explore possible meanings of *circulatio* in various contexts within Bach's liturgical oeuvre.

The melodic contour of both examples involves an ascent to a higher pitch, descent to a pitch lower than the first, followed by a return to the first or one close to it. In 1650 this mannerism had been described by Athanasius Kircher (*Musurgia Universalis*), as the aural equivalent of a circle, or *circulatio*, representing either God, or the sun (which also rises, falls, and returns from whence it came). Johann Sebastian was no doubt familiar with the extra-musical connotations of this figure (after 1732 at least) as his cousin, Johann Gottfried Walther had replicated Kircher's description of the *circulatio* in his *Musicalisches Lexicon* of that same year.<<

See Dietrich Bartel's composite definition based upon various original sources as given at:

<http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Topics/Circulatio-Source.htm>

Problems with Smith’s understanding and explanation of *circulatio*:

1. “The *circulatio* as a musical symbol for the rising and setting of the sun”

and/or

“an aural equivalent of a circle representing either God or the sun (which also rises, falls, and returns from whence it came).”

In these latter quotations, you will find mentioned both Kircher and Walther. In the Kircher source, one of the few to indicate anything at all about the text-expressive content of this figure, all that is given is the notion of ‘circular motion/movement.’ As the readers may determine for themselves, Bartel explicitly states: “Even Walther, who frequently quotes Janovka in his *Lexicon*, does not mention the text-interpretive nature of the figure [*circulatio*, etc.]. Bartel’s summary definition of the *circulatio* is “a series of usually eight notes in a circular or sine wave formation.”



Now we need to step down from this to Printz’s and later Walther’s confirmation of a *circulo mezzo* or ‘half-circle’ which has only four notes in the figure.



Printz states that either the first and third notes or, in the opposing situation as above, the second and fourth notes must be at the same pitch level. As far as the other notes are concerned, they must be different (“have different pitches”), but the interval of divergence from the those on the same level is not clearly specified, although the examples show that the *circulatio*, eight-note pattern must have the repeated note in each group of four notes one step higher or lower than the median note (in the following instance, the ‘g’):



In all the other musical examples given in the primary sources the divergence (size of the interval) from the main note to the repeated note is never more than a second.

2. “Johann Sebastian Bach's contemporaries, Kircher and Walther...”

How does Athanasius Kircher qualify as a contemporary when his birth and death dates are 1601 and 1680 respectively?

3. “Bach himself used this figure (remarkably similar to his name in tones) as a symbol for the cross and Christ.”

Here Smith’s use of this figure no longer corresponds historically with the evidence given by various theorists in the German *musica poetica* tradition, nor is there any direct evidence linking the musical subject/melody for the notes B – A – C – H with the definitions and explanations for *circulatio*, *circolo*, etc. found in printed sources from the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. For one, the “remarkable similarity” of a *circulatio* (strictly defined by historical records), involves two major steps (leaps?) away from the traditional understanding of the term: 1) the pattern has changed from having either the first and third or else the second and fourth notes be the same to the first and fourth being the same (or nearly the same); 2) the definition of *circulatio* has been widely expanded to include \*any\* interval occurring in the leap from the first to the second and once again from the second to the third note. Any zig-zag pattern is now a *circulatio*. Does this not become the opposite of the original notion behind *circulatio* which is based upon the idea of ‘circle’ or ‘to encircle’? The jagged edges/arms of the ‘cross’ come to mind here.

4. The *circulatio* as defined by Smith is

“an ascent to a higher pitch, descent to a pitch lower than the first, followed by a return to the first or one close to it”

This is Smith’s resulting, all-encompassing definition of *circulatio* which will have the reader depart substantially from the evidence of the historical record, yet maintain the term *circulatio* with an entirely new meaning and definition. To this definition is then added the ‘BACH’ – motif, an inversion of the above definition.



Perhaps a better term for Smith’s notion of *circulatio* would have been the ‘BACH trope’/‘BACH morpheme’ or the ‘X-trope’/‘X-morpheme.’ Here are some inversions of Smith’s definition of *circulatio*:



5. “Johann Sebastian was no doubt familiar with the extra-musical connotations of this figure (after 1732 at least) as his cousin, Johann Gottfried Walther had replicated Kircher's description of the *circulatio* in his *Musicalisches Lexicon* of that same year.”

This simply is not borne out by the evidence which is cited to support it! The tenuous thread or connection between ‘Circle’ = ‘Sun’ = ‘God’ = ‘Son/Christ’ = ‘BACH’ (melodic motif) = ‘Bach’ (as an individual Christian or member of the human race who has placed his musical signature at critical junctures in his music where he bears his own cross) cannot be proved by incorrectly citing primary sources to back up this theory. Perhaps then it should simply be left to the individual listener/reader to intuit this connection as a reasonable, feasible idea based upon what we know about Bach’s personal attitude toward the religion he favored. It seems to be quite evident that Bach treats the textual references to Christ’s cross in a very special manner whenever they occur in his settings of sacred music, but perhaps the term *circulatio*, due to the weight of its historical evidence, is ill-suited for describing this feature postulated by Smith, a feature that deserves further investigation and explication.

Thomas Braatz