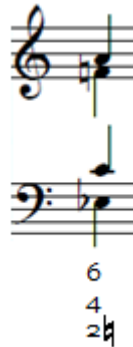


Transient chords in J. S. Bach's chorals¹

Bach's four part settings of chorals are still admired. But are they fully understood? Bach's harmonizations contain subtleties which are worth discussing. A conspicuous example is presented by Lars Ulrich Abraham's analysis of the chord

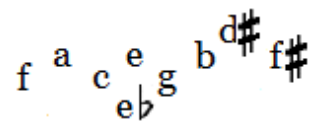


as it occurs in the second line of the choral 'Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden' in the St. Matthew Passion:



According to Abraham, this chord, following the *E*-minor chord, is 'undoubtedly' (*zweifelsfrei*) the third inversion of the Dominant 7th in *B*-flat major.²

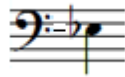
I tend to question this, simply because this chord has no dominant function at all. In my view, it is a transient chord of a form that occurs more often in Bach's four part writings. Its four tones are located in the following Eitz-diagram:



¹ This short essay comes from a book in preparation on four part writing.

² Abraham (1984b), p. 117.

Moreover, the lower tone,³ from the key of *B*-flat major



is too far away from the preceding *E*-minor chord.

Transient chords of the form

	+		
+		+	
			+

are also used by Bach in other chorals, for example, in the choral ‘Ach wie nichtig, ach wie flüchtig’:

$f\# \quad c\# \quad g\#$
 $d \quad f \quad a \quad e \quad c \quad g \quad b$

This fragment posed a serious problem to a follower of Eitz,⁴ Gustav Ebert, who wrote a book on the acoustic analysis of chorals by Bach.⁵ But he at least explicitly stated that he had difficulties with such examples, quite different from Lars Ulrich Abraham, who seemed pretty sure of himself.

Transition chords form an interesting subject for theoreticians. Let us therefore have a closer look at Bach’s use of them.

For instance, Bach also uses chords with a rhombus form:

+		+	
	+		+

and

³ Indicated in the score by a dash.

⁴ Eitz (1891).

⁵ Ebert (1913), p. 24.

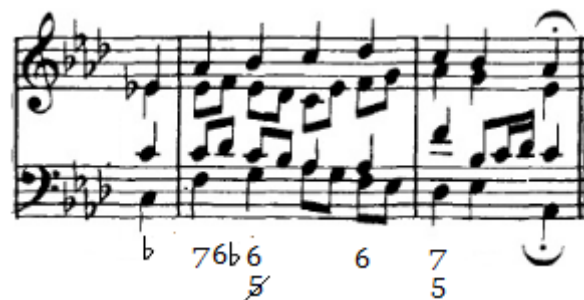
	+		+
+		+	

Both forms occur in the beginning of the aria ‘Komm, süßes Kreuz’ (St. Matthew Passion):



The former ‘rhombus chord’ occurs more than once in chorals, functioning as a transient chord. I mention the (6 4 2)-chord in the last but one bar of ‘Mir hat die Welt trüglich gericht’t’, and the (6 4 2)-chord in bar 5 of ‘Wie wunderbarlich ist doch diese Strafe’ in St. Matthew Passion, moreover the (6 4 2)-chord in the last but one bar of ‘Er nahm Alles wohl in Acht’ in St. John’s Passion.

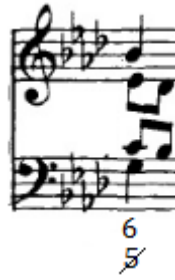
However, the latter rhombus chord has a subdominant function in the following example, taken from the end of ‘Ich bin’s, ich sollte büßen’ in St. Matthew Passion:



Surprisingly, two instances of the former rhombus form can be distinguished in this fragment. The first,



can be regarded as a transient chord, whereas the second



looks more like a discord by suspension, although Bach did not show this in the figured bass.

Here ends my introduction to Bach's transient chords. Of course, there is much more to say about his four part writing. This is postponed to the book in preparation.

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