

Tafelmusik

Bach *St. Matthew Passion* PROGRAMME NOTES

A Brief History of the Lutheran Passion by Charlotte Nediger

The tradition of reciting the Passion, or the story of the Crucifixion as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, was established as early as the fourth century. The texts were read as Gospel lessons during Holy Week, and were to be recited “in a solemn manner.” This manner of recitation, or chant, soon took on a rough musical and dramatic shape. Manuscripts from the ninth century, for example, include annotations of pitch, tempo and volume, all indicated by a system of *litterae significativae* (literally, “significant letters”). The text was divided between an Evangelist, reciting the narrative sections, the role of Christ, and the *turba* (“crowd”), the latter including the various individuals in the Passion and the people as a whole. The Evangelist’s part was marked *c* (*celeriter* - moving ahead), and was to be sung at a middle pitch; Christ’s text was marked *t* (*tenere* - held back), and was to be sung at a low pitch; the *turba* roles were to be sung strongly and at a higher pitch. Further markings for differentiation were gradually added, and by the 16th century polyphony was introduced, particularly for the *turba* portions.

This early framework provided the model for the post-Reformation Lutheran Passion settings. The pastor and other clergy intoned the narrative roles of the Evangelist and Christ, the choir sang the increasingly complex *turba* choruses, and the congregation responded with chorale hymns at appropriate moments in the text, the whole done in the vernacular. Toward the end of the 17th century, the influence of the new baroque form of the sacred oratorio was felt, and the new “oratorio Passion” became popular. Instruments, previously barred from the church during Lent, were introduced. The traditional recitation tones were replaced by composed recitative. Lyrical poems and reflective verses were inserted in the text, and set as solo arias and chorales. By the second quarter of the 18th century, performances of Passions in Germany often took a public stage. In Hamburg, for example, Lenten performances of Passions by Telemann, Handel and others were given in concert halls to a paying public, entirely removed from the divine service. These large-scale oratorio Passions were usually settings of completely original texts, and were almost operatic in style.

There were many who were offended by secular presentations of such a quintessentially sacred subject as that of Christ’s Passion. The Town Council of Leipzig was among them. The influence of traditional Lutheran theology was still strong in Leipzig, and in signing his contract as Thomaskantor, Bach had to agree not to write in an excessively operatic style. Indeed, the first Passion of the “modern” type, *i.e.* with instruments, composed recitatives, arias, and so on, was only performed in Leipzig in 1721, under Bach’s predecessor Kuhnau. Until then, only the traditional Passion performances in psalmody had been known.

Bach composed at least two Passion settings for Leipzig, the *St. John* in 1724, and the *St. Matthew*

in 1727. The latter overshadows all other Passion settings, in its size (scored for two choirs and orchestras), scope and complexity, as well as its power and poignancy. In many ways it represents a summation of the Lutheran history of the Passion. The setting is distinctly liturgical, and decidedly Lutheran. The two parts would have been presented to the congregation on either side of the Good Friday sermon, preceded and followed by congregational hymns. The music and text was meant to speak directly to the individual listener who, together with the performers, was to experience the Passion story on a deeply personal level. It is, in a sense, truly functional music, but in Bach's hands so sublime that it reaches well beyond the liturgy of a baroque German church service.

A Note about our Performances

In baroque Germany, liturgical choral music fell into two general categories: complex concerted music (i.e. with instruments), and simpler motets sung *a capella* or with continuo accompaniment. The latter were performed by choirs with several singers on each part. The concerted music was sung by a small ensemble of singers who took on the solo roles, and joined together to sing the choral movements. Most of Bach's Leipzig cantatas, for example, were performed by only four singers: three of the most talented students from the Thomasschule plus a bass from the university. For large-scale cantatas, special occasions, and the Good Friday Passions, a second vocal quartet was added to fill out the sound in the choruses. In the *St. Matthew Passion* Bach asked for extra resources: an expanded group of instrumentalists split into two orchestras, and twelve singers. Of the twelve singers, eight are divided, like the orchestra, into two groups, and sing the solo arias and choruses. They also take on most of the recitative roles, including the extensive roles of Evangelist and Jesus. To this quartet is added an extra baritone, singing several recitative roles, and a trio of soprano ripienists, singing the descant chorales in the opening and closing choruses of Part I.

Our performances this week are based on this baroque performance tradition, rather than the modern tradition of a multi-voiced choir and a distinct group of soloists. The only exception we've made is to the taxing role of the Evangelist, which was assigned by Bach to the tenor of Choir I, who then also sang the Tenor I solo aria and choruses. However, in Leipzig the Passion was performed only once, during the Good Friday service. It would be unwise, if not impossible, for the tenor to undertake all of this in six performances over the course of only seven days. Charles Daniels, singing the role of Evangelist this week, will therefore sing the Tenor II chorus roles, and will hand over both tenor arias to his colleague Julian Podger.

Notes on Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*

by Robert Mealy

When J.S. Bach arrived in Leipzig in 1723, he found that his new job at the Thomaskirche offered not only a weekly requirement of cantatas, but also the opportunity to create more extended liturgical music for one of the most important moments in the Lutheran calendar. In 1724, Bach composed his first extended Passion using the story of the Crucifixion from the Gospel of John, cobbling together a text out of various sources. Soon thereafter he began work on a much bigger setting of the Passion narrative from the Gospel of Matthew, in collaboration with the distinguished Leipzig poet C.F. Henrici, known as Picander. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* received its first performance on Good Friday of 1727, as part of the usual afternoon Vespers service; its two parts would have framed a lengthy sermon, with congregational hymns before and after the Passion setting. Bach did not intend this to

be a concert oratorio, but rather a devotional exercise, using all available musical means to make the central story of Christianity as vivid and immediate as possible to his listeners.

The enormous scale of the work is clear from the very opening, as a slow lament begins, grounded in a low E tolling in the basses like a funeral bell. Bach scored this work for two choirs and orchestras, and here he uses them to full effect as they call back and forth. At the climax of their dialogue, a very different sound enters: yet another choir sings the text of the Agnus Dei not in E minor, but in bright, redemptive G major. Bach is not just creating an overwhelming musical effect with this, he's making a deeply important theological point. This contrast between earthly tragedy and heavenly grace, and the theme of the innocent lamb of God taking on our sins out of love, are motifs that thread their way throughout the arias and choruses of this work.

Bach's experience in working and reworking the *St. John Passion* had taught him how to create a coherent large-scale musical architecture out of a Biblical narrative that (like most episodes of the Bible) does not exactly follow the conventions of 18th-century drama. With the *St. Matthew Passion*, he had the advantage of working closely with one poet to create a unified libretto. The result is an elegant sequence of straightforward biblical narrative, recitatives that comment on the action, arias meditating on the implications of these events, and verses from chorales that the Leipzig congregation would have immediately recognized.

This pattern of narrative and commentary was familiar to Bach's listeners thanks to their regular diet of sermons, whose meditations on Biblical verses could even include poetry in the first person. (In fact, recent research shows that nearly half the arias in this work are poetic adaptations from a collection of sermons that Bach owned.) Musically, the effect is one of rapid changes of tone: just as we find ourselves caught up in the dramatic story of Jesus's betrayal, trial and crucifixion, we are forced to consider the events as they affect us personally in a contemplative aria where the drama takes on an interior symbolic weight, or in a chorale where we, the congregation, accept our complicity in the actions depicted.

Sometimes these shifts of register are instantaneous, as when Jesus tells the disciples that one among them will betray him; they ask him "Lord, is it I?" (tellingly, the phrase is repeated only eleven times). Immediately, the same singers answer in a chorale "It is I, I should atone." These insistently personal responses to the unfolding story are all the more wrenching since this Gospel is so concerned with the human forgetfulness and betrayal that inevitably lead to Jesus's death. Despite their best intentions, his disciples continually abandon him, most plainly in the Garden of Gethsemane, where they fall asleep. Here Jesus's terror at his fate is vividly conveyed by the shuddering bass-line of "*O Schmerz!*" ("Oh anguish!") as the soloist explains to the choir that Christ must undergo this suffering for everyone's sake.

Jesus's meditations are interrupted by the arrival of the soldiers, and Judas betrays him with a kiss. The duet with chorus that follows is one of Bach's most remarkable musical effects in a score full of astonishments: the violins provide a barren bass-line, over which the woodwinds and two solo voices entwine an aria of loss on a cosmic scale, as "moon and light for sorrow have set." Meanwhile the second chorus and orchestra interrupts with violent outcries to "Loose him! Stop, do not bind him!" The tension is released in the following double chorus of ferocious intensity, calling down the forces of nature to intervene: after a sudden silence, the cries renew, now for Hell itself to open up and "wreck, ruin, engulf, shatter" the betrayer. The disciples flee, and Part I is ended. Originally Bach had closed this section with a simple chorale, but in his meticulously prepared score of 1736 he substituted a chorus that may well date from his Weimar years. This chorale fantasia on "*O Mensch,*

bewein' dein Sünde groß" ("O Man, bewail your great sin") serves well to illustrate the scattering of the disciples: like Jesus's friends, the movement vanishes into thin air at its end.

After the intermission, which here substitutes for the two-hour sermon that Leipzigers would have expected, the story resumes with Jesus's trial and crucifixion. The betrayals continue; when a case is made against Jesus, all his enemies can come up with are two false witnesses, who repeat their testimony in mindless rote canon. His silence in the face of these accusations prompts a recitative and aria on the theme of patience.

The crowd condemns him to death, and the scene shifts to Peter, who betrays Christ in a new way, refusing any association with him. The cock crows, and Peter realizes his terrible act; his tears of remorse are taken up in the aria that immediately follows, a heartfelt lament for alto and obbligato violin. Judas, too, repents, but his only recourse is suicide. The violence of this scene, and the horror of betrayal for a price, lead immediately to another aria for obbligato violin, but where "*Erbarme dich*" ("Have mercy") is deeply consoling, "*Gebt mir meinen Jesum wieder!*" ("Give me back my Jesus!") is full of angry virtuoso passagework.

As in his earlier *St. John Passion*, Bach structures the trial scene that follows in a symmetrical scheme around one central point. Here it is the response to Pilate's question "Why, what evil hath he done?" A luminous accompanied recitative enumerates his good works, which leads to the extraordinary aria "*Aus liebe will mein Heiland sterben*" ("Out of love my Saviour is willing to die") scored for the otherworldly combination of soprano, flute, and two oboes da caccia, with no continuo at all. This aria is an island of radiance in a dark scene; immediately afterwards, we are thrust back again into the crowd demanding Jesus's crucifixion.

The road to the cross is marked with one of the most striking of the many extraordinary arias in this work, a ferociously virtuosic obbligato for viola da gamba. This calls up associations of majesty and royalty (the gamba was the instrument of kings, and the aria is set in sharply-dotted rhythms associated with regal and stately overtures) as well as deep tragedy; the sheer weight of the cross is conveyed in the anguished, limping intervals that the gamba outlines. This paradox of the crucifixion bringing both intense suffering and liberation is taken up with the alto's highly charged arioso "*Ach, Golgotha!*" ("Alas, Golgotha!"), accompanied again by the pungent sound of oboes da caccia, and her following aria "*Sehet*" ("See"), where the mood transforms and Jesus is seen as a consoling, comforting figure.

The final moment of Jesus's life, as his words are stripped of the halo of strings that have accompanied him, marks the lowest point of an extended modulation downwards over the course of this half; his last words are in the extremely remote key of E-flat minor. The work moves to a close with an extended series of meditations on death and sleep. In the end, Jesus is laid to rest within ourselves, and the dark night of the soul becomes the cool of the evening, where "peace is now made with God."

Scholar-performer Robert Mealy began his musical career in the violin section of Tafelmusik. He is currently Professor of Early Music at Yale and a faculty member of the new historical performance department at Juilliard. He leads the Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra among other ensembles, and is a member of the medieval quartet Fortune's Wheel, the Renaissance violin band The King's Noyse, and the new 17th-century ensemble Quicksilver.

The St. Matthew Passion, Anti-Judaism and Bach's Piety

by the Rev. Prof. Peter Wyatt

The Gospel of Matthew is the most transparently Jewish of the gospels, beginning its narrative with the genealogy of Abraham, the forebear (with Sarah) of the Jewish people, and repeatedly citing Hebrew scripture to underscore the continuity of God's purposes in the life and ministry of Jesus. Matthew shows respect for learned interpretation of the Law (Torah) and portrays Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as a new Moses. While the Gospel contains vehement denunciations of "the scribes and Pharisees," it is not their teaching but their perceived hypocrisy against which Jesus is seen to inveigh.

With regard to the vexed question of responsibility for the death of Jesus, Matthew and the other canonical gospels make clear that the Roman occupying power executed him on a charge of sedition, namely, that he was an insurrectionist, reputedly having raised his standard as "king of the Jews." The gospel narratives also make clear that the instigators of the charge were the religious authorities of the day (members of the high priestly party, the Sadducees). Recognition of this collusion is important, since it underscores the sad reality that even religion can be twisted in the attempt to thwart God's purposes and to oppress other humans. History is replete with instances of such collusion between church and state, not least in the case of the Christian persecution of Jews throughout many centuries. This history of persecution is the deepest stain on the fabric of Christian faith. It is a dreadful irony that such cruel deeds were carried out in the name of "the King of love."

The cry of the mob gathered before Pilate's judgment seat, "His blood be upon us and our children," remains deeply disturbing. However, as in the case of the leading Sadducees, the crowd (and even its descendents) cannot be identified with the Jewish people as a whole. Public executions, including contemporary ones, invariably draw a ghoulish rabble.

Today Christian congregations and their leaders take pains to wrest the Passion narrative from anti-Judaic interpretation. Indeed, with regard to the question of guilt for the death of Jesus, the answer of true Christian piety throughout history has been, "It is I." Judas the betrayer, denying Peter, outraged Caiaphas, duplicitous Pilate, the brutal soldiery, the mocking crowd – all form a gallery in which any soul might find a niche. Bach knew this and his libretto reflects, again and again, that the suffering and death of Jesus call for no scapegoat – only loving response.

It is worthy of note that the 18th-century Lutheranism in which Bach lived and worked was characterized by a tension between a rationalist approach to faith (doctrinal orthodoxy) and a recovery of heart's-depth, if not mystical, faith (pietism). Bach's music shows his indebtedness to both tendencies, but his libretto leaves little doubt that to the Jesus of the Passion Bach pours out his devotion unreservedly.

Peter Wyatt is immediate past principal of Emmanuel College, the University of Toronto, and served as copastor (with his wife, the Rev. Joan Wyatt) of Trinity-St. Paul's United Church, 1989-1995. In the years 1995-2001 he served The United Church of Canada as General Secretary for Theology, Faith and Ecumenism.