

It is more beneficial to ponder Christ's Passion just once than to fast a whole year or to pray a psalm daily. Martin Luther

Not only is it “the more radical of Bach’s surviving Passion settings,” asserts the celebrated conductor John Eliot Gardiner, the *St. John Passion* “packs a more powerful dramatic punch than any Passion setting before or since.”

Following positions in Arnstadt, Mühlhausen, Weimar and Cöthen, the 38-year old Johann Sebastian Bach permanently settled in Leipzig, a city of about 25,000 inhabitants, in 1723. His new position included roles as *Cantor* at the St. Thomas School, *Director Musices* for the city, and overseer for the organists and other musicians at the two principal churches. Fortunately for posterity, he was also required to compose. Remarkably, during his first decade alone, he produced over 220 cantatas, three settings of the passion, and two versions of his *Magnificat*. Early in his tenure, Bach’s first large-scale composition, this work, *The Passion according to St. John*, received its first performance at the St. Nicholas Church at the Vespers service on Good Friday, April 7, 1724.

Bach presented the *St. John Passion* again the following year at St. Thomas Church, but with many revisions. A third version followed in 1732, and a fourth in 1749. Christoph Wolff, the eminent Bach scholar, confirms that this fourth version, presented “on the penultimate Good Friday before his death, ... was close to that of 1724, but with larger forces than hitherto called for.” Today’s performance will include some of Bach’s final revisions, including the addition of harpsichord to accompany the narration.

Structure of the Passion

The purpose of Bach’s *St. John Passion* was and is to bring his listeners to a personal understanding of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for the redemption of mankind. The work is clearly a musical masterpiece, one acclaimed by Professor Wolff as “marked throughout its entire course by musical craftsmanship of the highest order.” A first-time listener, however, might benefit from a brief explanation of how a Bach Passion is constructed. To begin, the work is divided into two Parts and, as was the custom in Leipzig, the two parts were separated by an hour-long sermon (replaced today by an intermission). Within each Part are separate scenes (although these were not designated by Bach), each containing three distinct components: the Gospel narrative, a personal reflection, and a corporate response.

The Gospel Narrative

The narrative text of the *St. John Passion* is based on Martin Luther’s translation of Chapters 18 and 19 from the Gospel of John. Differing from the other accounts, John omits the disciples’ falling asleep while Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, the death of Judas, the dream of Pilate’s wife, and the ultimate acknowledgement that “truly this was the Son of God.” Moreover, his description of the Last Supper, which includes many of the teachings of Jesus, is so long that Bach leaves it out entirely. However, sensing the unique dramatic opportunities in the disciple Peter’s lament and the earthquake at the moment of Christ’s death, Bach borrowed these scenes from the Gospel of Matthew.

Additional Texts

The sacred poetry Bach selected for the arias was likely written by Heinrich Brockes, whose passion text was set by Handel, Telemann and others. The Lutheran chorales, familiar to all in the congregation, were also personally selected by Bach. Professor Daniel Meramed of Yale University identifies a unique feature of the chorale texts: “Many of them are in the first person. This choice by the librettist is meant to draw the hearer into the story but also to make a broad theological point, reflecting the importance of the individual’s personal relationship to the passion story in Lutheran theology.”

Each “scene” of the Gospel narrative is followed by an aria and chorale that offer reflection on what has just taken place. In this way Bach alternates the “action” with contemplation, providing the listener with time to ponder each scene.

The Biblical narration is sung by the “Evangelist” (a tenor soloist) in a musical style called *recitative*; the melody follows the patterns of speech, both in rhythm as well as the rise and fall of pitch. The dialogue spoken by Jesus, Peter and Pilate is also sung in recitative, but by other soloists. Groups of people (the Chief Priests, the angry mob, band of soldiers, etc.) are portrayed by the Chorus.

The personal reflections that follow each scene are provided by the *arias* sung by the four soloists. These solo arias often include *obbligato* parts for one or more solo instruments which reinforce the emotional affect with a decorative counter-melody. The purpose of the arias is to provide the listener with time to meditate or reflect on the gravity of what has just transpired.

The corporate response is achieved through the insertion of familiar *chorales*, many of which are still known by listeners today, at key moments. The purpose of the chorales is to unify the listeners in a common shared experience that extend back to childhood.

The Chorus

Unlike the soloists, the Chorus functions in three completely different ways: Its **first** role is to provide the Prologue and Epilogue, the two large movements that “book-end” the Passion. These movements provide both preparation for what is about to take place and a final opportunity to “take it all in.” The **second** role is to portray the angry mob, high priests and soldiers in the *turba* (mob) choruses. The **third** role of the chorus is to represent—and galvanize—the Congregation of Believers by singing the well-known chorales. It is no accident that Bach chose the identical singers to represent the bloodthirsty mob *and* the Congregation of Believers. Gardiner affirms, “That the very persecutors of Christ from whom we recoil with outrage and disgust are *us* makes the experience of His Passion all the more emotionally harrowing.”

A word about the Prologue, which sets the stage for the emotionally-charged drama about to take place, might be helpful. The orchestral opening immediately captures the turbulence and dissonance that permeates the Passion story. But in contrast, the Chorus enters with “Lord, Lord, Lord, our Master, how excellent is

Thy name in all the earth!” Even as Christ faces His crucifixion, His glory and majesty are simultaneously proclaimed.

In 1724 as well as today, Bach’s passion connects with listeners in a unique and tri-fold way: we *hear* the Passion story of the Christ who suffered and died for our sins, we *ponder* what each step along His path means to us individually, and we *connect* to other believers through music we have known and shared our entire lives.

St. John, Bach and Responsibility for Christ’s Death

The responsibility for the death of Jesus is often raised in connection with the Gospel of John, where references to the role of “the Jews” are often read today in light of the history of anti-Semitism. To be sure, the Gospel of John mentions “the Jews” 72 times, and most references are in a negative manner. Jeannette Sorrell, conductor of Apollo’s Fire, provides a historical reference by explaining “The Book of John arose in a Jewish Christian community in the process of breaking from the Jewish synagogue. It regularly describes Jesus’ opponents simply as ‘the Jews.’ In later centuries, the book was unfortunately used to support anti-Semitic polemics. However, it is important to understand that the author(s) of the gospel regarded himself/themselves as Jews, championed Jesus and his followers as Jews, and probably wrote for a largely Jewish community.”

Considering his own historical context, one might expect that Bach would continue John’s charge against “the Jews.” But this is not the case. While Brockes’ Passion served as the basis for his poetic texts, Bach removed Brockes’ anti-Semitic passages and clearly “placed the guilt on each of us as sinners.” Sorrell affirms, “This was also Luther’s view.” Bach poses the central question each one of us must ask: “Is it someone else...or am I, a sinner, responsible for Christ’s death?” One need only look in the score: in the third chorale, the congregation of believers asks “who dared to strike my Lord?” And Bach answers, “I, I and my sins.”

While Bach makes it clear that it is our sins that have crucified Christ, we are not without hope. Near the end of the Passion, during the aria ‘Mein teurer Heiland,’ the bass soloist questions: ‘is redemption of all the world here?’ And the answer is emphatically proclaimed: ‘Yes’.

As Christ’s body is laid in the tomb Bach provides a closing lullaby so that He may “rest well.” And then, *after* the closing Epilogue, he adds a simple chorale to affirm the promise of our risen Lord and our hope for life eternal. In this brief final moment, Bach preaches to the faithful that, through Christ’s sacrifice and grace, we will come face to face with our Savior in that final day. There is no moment like this in all of music history.