

# *Johannespassion* BWV 245

## Program Notes

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The two extant Passion settings of J. S. Bach are the crown jewels in a lineage of protestant German settings going back to the mid-sixteenth century. Tonight we will hear the first of Bach's settings, the Gospel according to Saint John composed in 1724. The other is the Gospel according to Saint Matthew composed two years later. Of these, the Matthew is the most celebrated. The Saint Matthew Passion, scored for two choruses and two orchestras for a full three hours of sounded music, eclipses the Saint John Passion in sheer volume by two-to-one. It is also the most complete and finished in feel. When compared with the John Passion, the Matthew seems imbued with an easily palatable lyricism that borders on sentimentality. Some years later Bach revisited the original score to the Matthew leaving us with a definitive musical text, which, in its canonic permanency, seems to transcend the ephemeral nature of paper and ink.

The posthumous popularity of the Matthew Passion began with Mendelssohn's revival in 1829. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Phillip Spitta became first of several Bach specialists to advocate for the Matthew Passion while taking cheap shots at the John Passion resulting in a century long bias. In the past thirty or forty years a growing number of Bach interpreters have questioned this conventional wisdom and now believe the John Passion to be on equal footing with the Matthew as the more radical of Bach's Passion settings. The John Passion plumbs the unsettling duality of sacred and profane in the human condition at a depth that causes strong reaction even in our age of instant access to digital depravity. It is in the John Passion that Bach sets the horror of a whip tearing the flesh on Jesus' back to the word "geißelte" (scourged) and immediately follows with the arioso *Betrachte meine Seel, mit ängstlichen Vergnügen* (Contemplate my soul, with anxious pleasure) expressing the dark sensual excitement derived from viewing the wounds. Then, at the moment of Jesus' last breath, Bach responds with a carnival-like gigue *Mein teurer Heiland, laß dich fragen* (My precious Savior, let me ask) where we as a congregation offer a proper public response of grief while, simultaneously and in metric opposition, the baritone sings the carnival theme asking the more honest question, "What's in it for me?"

### **How do I, the listener, approach the music?**

The Saint John Passion is written in such a way that a first time listener can, without preparation, fully engage with the music. But to go subcutaneous, we need to understand the two main pillars of the drama, the *narrative* and the *commentary*.

The *narrative* is the musical setting of the text, word-by word, from the Gospel of John as found in the Luther Bible of 1534 (with two additions from the Gospel of Matthew) and is set in the forms of both recitative and crowd choruses. The recitatives are the words of John, sung by the Evangelist (tenor) and the words of Jesus, Pilate, Peter, the doorkeeper and the soldier. Bach gives the Evangelist expressive and codified music that expands the vocal range far beyond previous models and imbues the vocal line with subconscious musical motives more akin to mini-Wagnerian Leitmotifs than Baroque gesture. Of particular note in the John is the crucifix motif of a rising, falling and again rising musical line punctuated with complex diminished harmonies. This motif appears in the recitatives of the Evangelist, Jesus and Pilate, not only with each mention of the cross, but also when crucifixion is implied in the subtext.

For the crowd choruses, which are interspersed within the recitative as part of the narrative, Bach provides music of such diverse and intense expression that it begs a challenge of sheer mettle with the greatest choruses of the operatic canon. One example is the intense and complex crowd chorus *Kreuzige, Kreuzige* (Crucify, crucify). With the bloodthirsty crowd's rapid enunciation juxtaposed with sweeping wails sung in duets of overlapping dissonances that outline the same cross motif found in the Evangelist's recitatives, we are confronted not only with raw hatred, but also an intricately premeditated cry for murder that is bone chilling.

The **commentary** serves as our response, in the here-and-now, to the unfolding narrative. Our response is expressed in the form of arias, chorales and two major choruses. The arias serve as intimate personal responses to specific action in the drama. Bach elevates the aria soloists to musical heights that have yet to be surpassed in the Passion genre. Of particular note is the soprano aria *Zerfieße mein Herze* (Dissolve my heart) and the alto aria *Es ist vollbracht* (It is finished). These two arias take us to an emotional place so focused, so still and entrancing that they are set apart from all other vocal pieces in the Western repertoire. The first aria, *Von dem stricken meiner Sünder* (Of the bonds of my sins) sung by the alto soloist, is our response to the bondage of Jesus as he is taken to trial. It is a musical representation of being bound in chains. The following effervescent soprano aria *Ich folge dir gleichfalls mit freudigen Schritten* (I follow you with happy steps) urges us to joyfully follow the along with Peter and John in the footsteps of Jesus as he goes to trial. The tenor responds to Peter's third denial with a tormented expression of guilt *Ach mein Sinn* (Ah, my mind). In further delineating the duality of the human condition, the tenor offers an immediate counter-response to the dark sensuality of the scourging of Jesus expressed in *Betrachte meine Seel* with the metaphor of the most beautiful rainbow in the reflection of the blood and water on Jesus' back. The bass aria *Eilt, ihr angefochtenen Seelen* (Hurry you tempted souls) is a response to Jesus carrying his cross. We are urged to embrace the wings of faith at the foot of the cross, while we, the eager congregants, ask the question "wohin?" (where?). The answer... to Golgatha!

While the arias provide intimate, personal response, the chorales provide the universal response of all humanity. This is accomplished primarily through the congregational style (or hymn style) of the chorales, Bach's choice of tunes and texts as well as his illuminative harmonizations. It would seem reasonable that the chorales were to be sung by the congregation in performance. However, there is no evidence of this, and at first glance, the music would suggest otherwise in that the tune is often set in a very high vocal range making it impractical for all but well trained voices to sing. According to the Bach specialist John Butt, it is considered likely that Bach used his second choir to join in the singing of the chorales. This is much like what you will hear in tonight's performance where we have the smaller choir singing the crowd choruses and the larger choir joining for the chorales and the two major choruses. Regardless of how they are performed, it is the feel of these chorales that draw us in as congregants, providing reflective pause at key moments in the drama.

The third element of the commentary, the major choruses, frames the Passion. In the opening chorus *Herr, unser Herrscher*, Bach, the dramatist, capitalizes on the eyewitness nature of John's account by thrusting us into the very moment of Christ's death. We are immediately awash in panic, wailing, fear and confusion. In the words of John Elliot Gardiner, we feel the opening chorus "sweeping all that comes before it." Bach then uses our immersion in the here-and-now to frame the entire remainder of the work as a flashback. As the final sounds of the opening chorus fade away, we are transported back to the previous evening, in the calm and quiet of the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus met with his disciples.

At the conclusion of the narrative, as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus lay the body of Christ in the tomb, the final chorus *Ruht Wohl ihr heilige Gebeine* (Rest well your blessed limbs) assuages our grief and provides the closure we need to face the world awaiting us outside the doors of the concert hall. Bach then allows us a final response of victory in the closing chorale. As we express the words *Herr Jesu Christ, erhöre mich, Ich will dich preisen ewiglich!* (Lord Jesus Christ hear me, I will praise you forever!), we are bathed in the bright light of heavenly redemption.

### Reception and Later Versions

The congregants who gathered in the St. Nicholas Church on Good Friday of 1724 had a good idea of what to expect having heard nearly a year of Bach's weekly cantatas. Even so, for some members of the congregation, it was overwhelming. In a contemporary account attributed to the premier of the Saint John "... people were thrown into the greatest bewilderment, looking at one another and saying, 'What will come of this?' " Furthermore, Bach was not a theologian and had no university degree. So to offer music of such theological and musical vividness in the university city of Leipzig, known for its theological faculty, was to do so at obvious peril.

This resistance to the premier prompted a revision for 1725. In the revised version, the jarring opening chorus was replaced by the grand but contemplative chorus *O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß*, which was then used the following year to close the first half of the Saint Matthew Passion. Gone was the vitriolic tenor aria *Ach mein Sinn*, replaced by a sturdy but more sensible tenor aria. Jettisoned also was the risqué *Betrachte meine Seele*. The following tenor aria *Erwäge* was replaced by another fine but comparatively benign and misplaced tenor aria. The alto aria *Von den Stricken* was replaced with a Bass soprano duet that, while musically splendid, had little connection to the surrounding drama. The final and extremely expressive chorale was also replaced with a one of a more elaborate and softer tone. While these alterations to the John Passion may have assuaged the angst of clergy and congregants, they also served as a Samsonesque shearing of its strength. But, unlike Samson, the John Passion never found strength in its altered form. In 1731, Bach set forth to pen a definitive version of the John Passion using the original music of 1724 with only slight alteration. But early in the process, the town council withdrew support for the performance and Bach put down his pen after only ten movements. Thus we are left with three versions to perform. Tonight, you will hear the first version heard on Good Friday of 1724.