

Essays on the Saint John Passion

What is a Passion?

A “Passion” is not a story about desire or strong emotion; rather it tells about suffering (“pas- sion” is related to “passive,” as in enduring an assault). The Christian Church uses this word to refer to the events surrounding the arrest, condemnation, and Crucifixion of Jesus.

As part of the observances of Holy Week (the period that commemorates these events), Christians read the passages from the four Gospels that relate the story. Early musical set- tings of the Passion were mostly chanted by a narrator, with different singers portraying Jesus, Peter, Pilate, and other characters; a choir or the congregation might sing words attributed to groups of people like the soldiers or the populace. By the early 18th century, these narrative movements were enhanced by opening and closing choral movements; by the insertion of familiar chorales (hymns) at various points in the story, and eventually also by meditative movements for solo singers containing newly composed poetry (not Biblical texts).

What about Bach’s Passions?

Bach wrote the St. John Passion, his first complete Passion setting, in 1724, during his first year in Leipzig. He borrowed pieces of existing librettos for the arias and framing chorus texts, combining texts from different poets, some of whom are unknown to us. The quantity and placement of the arias was likely Bach’s decision, as was the choice of chorale verses and location. With no sacred music performed in the church during the six weeks of Lent, Bach had time to work on his first large-scale sacred composition.

How is a Bach Passion put together?

The Lutheran Passions were intended to be heard during the Good Friday service. Just as with the shorter weekly cantatas, they were positioned before and after the sermon given by the Rector. The St. John Passion divides into two parts; Part I narrates the events that occurred on Maundy Thursday (the arrest and betrayal of Peter), while the much longer Part II covers the story from the morning of Good Friday, when Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, through the Crucifixion itself and the burial of Jesus.

Why are there soloists who play roles, and soloists without character roles?

The major part of the Gospel narrative is delivered by a tenor soloist, called the Evangelist. His words are literally Biblical, even including the narrative connections

“he said” “they replied” etc. Other soloists are assigned to sing the words of Jesus, Peter, Pilate, and various other speakers in the story; but the use of a narrator removes any sense of theatrical drama. All these figures sing in a speech-like style called “recitative” accompanied only by organ and cello.

When groups of people speak in the Gospel narrative, Bach creates choral movements; these are called “turba” choruses, or “crowd” choruses. These are brief but are accompanied by the full orchestra and often use elaborate contrapuntal techniques.

In contrast to the Biblical words sung by these various performers, Bach places stanzas of familiar Lutheran chorales, and full-scale aria movements for solo singers, as commentary on events just told. These movements voice contemporary Christians’ reactions to specific events. By interrupting the strict narrative, the chorales and arias underline the contemplative nature of the piece.

Why is Bach’s St. John Passion great? Why is it controversial?

The St. John Passion is a potent allegory of institutional corruption. A religious power structure that has lost touch with its founding principles becomes a collaborator with an occupying force, and marginalizes, then destroys, the reformer from within who speaks the truth and tries to bring the faith back to its roots. The High Priests are these perverted leaders of the community to which Jesus also belongs. Those in our age or any age who would set themselves up as possessors of moral truth and ethical standards should look in the mirror to determine if they, too, have turned aside from the values they purport to uphold.

In contrast with this political drama are the moments of individual or communal reflection. Bach’s placement of arias and chorales have the effect of slow motion or freeze frame; sincere reactions to events in the narrative that focus the attention on personal tragedy and suffering. Most vivid of all is the sequence of movements placed at the moment of Jesus’s death; Bach focuses on the overwhelming sense of grief and loss, taking us through the process in a sensitive and minute examination of this most human of experiences.

Perhaps this, then, is the ultimate reason the St. John Passion is so disturbing: Bach invests his mastery of color, harmony, and time into every scene, every action; in places it’s hard to look away even if the material reflects aspects of ourselves that we would rather avoid.

The St. John Passion invites us on a wild ride filled with turbulent anger, profound meditation, vicious irony, and intense grief. We undertake this journey because at each instant we recognize the humanity in the music; the repugnant aspects of our

nature as well as the most elevated. This is the composer's genius: to make us experience a universe of emotions in order to exorcise evil and embrace goodness.

By Pamela Dellal

St. John Passion

The Gospel of John, apparently the last of the four to be written (after 70 A.D.) is very different from the three synoptic gospels. It presents a transcendent, mystical, philosophical Jesus, aware of the Old Testament prophecies and of his fate as a sojourner who came from above and will soon return there. According to John, Jesus warns his followers that their eventual persecution will mirror his, and that it will come from their own: "they shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service." (16:2, used by Bach as a text in Cantata BWV 44).

The Gospel of John, as it enters the Passion narrative, mutes Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. Absent are the "multitudes" mentioned in the other gospels. It then transcribes a three-chapter long instruction to the disciples, delivered after the Passion Supper, that moves between the terrifying realities of a hostile world and the rapture of the world to come. These chapters, all of which precede the beginning of the St. John Passion text, hover over Bach's composition. With Chapter Eighteen, the tone of John's narrative shifts to reportage, stark details, urgent pacing, stories intercut like film, threads dropped and quickly picked up. And we notice the recurrent labeling of "the Jews" (rather than, as in the other gospels, "they," "the crowd," "the people") as the enemies of Christ. This is, at best, paradoxical, since Jesus and his followers conceived of themselves as thoroughly within Judaism, and since Jesus' thought moves not only away from but also radically back toward the Law ("Did not Moses give you the Law, and yet none of you keepeth the Law," John 7:19). By attempting to transform Jesus and his followers into non-Jews, the book of John becomes a path to the racial caricatures in medieval passion plays, Hitler-era posters, and even a recent popular motion picture.

Many mistakenly believe that the author of the last Gospel was the Apostle John, referred to throughout as "the apostle whom Jesus loved." Others, because of the author's demonization of the Jews, believe him instead to be a radical Gentile convert. It is more likely that he was a Jew who initially expected, as did the early followers generally, that most adherents would come from within Judaism, and who was bitterly disappointed when that did not happen. It is interesting to remember that one of the principals in the Passion narrative, Peter, the first Pope, emerges in Acts as the staunchest advocate of keeping the movement

strictly within Jewish practice, losing out in early church councils to the proselytizing instincts of Paul.

In performing the piece, and other Bach works based on John (for example, Cantata BWV 42 that begins with the fearful apostles in hiding after the crucifixion), it is valuable to try to understand something about the attitudes of both author and composer. What is Bach's stance?

He is certainly of his time and place. He sets an inflammatory Reformation Sunday Luther text with vehemence in Cantata BWV 126, "Deliver us, Lord, by your Word from the Pope's control and the Turk's murders." In the texts from John, he goes where they take him, more with the instincts of a dramatist than an ideologue. In the Passion, he invests fully in both the fierce irony of "Hail to thee, King of the Jews," by means of a perversion of the most elegant eighteenth-century dance form, the minuet, and in the extraordinarily pliant tenderness of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus when they come to bury Jesus "according to Jewish custom," where the Gospel writer suddenly reminds us that these events all transpired in the context of Jewish observance.

"About suffering they were never wrong, the Old Masters," says Auden in his poem "Musée des Beaux Arts." And in an era when we confront Torture as national policy, we must engage with Torture as part of this narrative. The recent movie previously cited reminds us that much of our modern artistic sensibility is numbingly literal-minded. Bach seeks metaphors, and never merely the mimetic, for the extremes depicted here. With the help of the strangely lurid aria texts, he forces us to look into our own inner abyss and suggests this might be the consequence of such a close view of the unthinkable.

About suffering they were never wrong, the Old Masters:
how well they understood its human position;
how it takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window ...

Auden cites the obliviousness to suffering of the ploughman in Breugel's Icarus, going about his business unaware of the distant splash. Auden might have just as easily mentioned the three aristocratic men conversing in the foreground of Piero Della Francesca's *Flagellation*, or the uninterrupted musicians of Donatello's *Salome*. Bach's gambling soldiers, gaily dominating the sonic foreground, are part of that tradition. As they shake their dice (in phrases fourteen measures long!) we are struck by how tenaciously the composer locks onto the smallest details. The wood-fire the high priest's servants name – they haunt because they are so actual. The name, Malchus, the very specific weather report, the anxious interjections: "and his witness is true," "we tell you this so you can believe" – these are peculiar to John's narrative, and Bach refuses to present them as asides.

But two climactic elements that Bach includes in the Saint John Passion are missing from the narrative in the Book of John: Peter's penitent weeping, and the earthquake marking Jesus' death. Bach borrowed them from Matthew. In his third version of the piece, with Scriptural scruples, he takes them out. Then in the fourth version (this performance), the dramatist prevails, and they are back in. The multiple versions (there is also an incomplete fifth version) speak of the composer's difficulties in venturing upon such a large-scale project. The magnificent second version, which introduces three elaborate chorale-prelude style pieces into the structure, represents the most drastic re-conception. After reassigning large portions of it to the Saint Matthew Passion and Cantata BWV 23, Bach moves back toward his first, tighter conception, a series of cantata-like scenes, usually concluded by "simple" chorale settings, the whole framed by madrigal choruses.

The strangely haunted character of the opening chorus suggests the anxiety of the disciples immediately after the crucifixion (Crucifixion: an ignominious and unexpected ending not yet illumined by Resurrection). If before hearing it, we read this text by an unknown author (perhaps the composer), would we guess the desperate quality of this setting? The final lullaby-chorus, its cascading bass patters so similar to the conclusion of the Saint Matthew Passion of a few years later, but less able to suggest closure, asks for punctuation in the form of a chorale end-stop—tensions and ambiguities that remain unresolved even by an epilogue upon an epilogue.

By John Harbison