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Liturgical drama in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*

Bach's two surviving *Passions* are often cited as evidence that he was perfectly capable of producing operatic masterpieces, had he chosen to devote his creative powers to this genre. This view clashes with the notion that church music ought to be calm and measured; indeed, Bach's contract as Cantor of St. Thomas's School in Leipzig stipulated:

In order to preserve the good order in the churches, [he would] so arrange the music that it shall not last too long, and shall be of such nature as not to make an operatic impression, but rather incite the listeners to devotion. (*New Bach Reader*, p. 105)

One could argue, however, that Bach was never entirely faithful to this pledge, and that in the *St. Matthew Passion* he came close to violating it entirely.

This article explores the fusion of the liturgical and the dramatic in the *St. Matthew Passion*, viewing the work as the combination of two dramas: the story of Christ's final hours, and the Christian believer's response to this story. This is not, of course, the only viable approach to this masterpiece. The *St. Matthew Passion* is a complex, heterogeneous work, rich in musical and expressive detail yet also displaying an impressive unity across its vast dimensions. This article does not pretend to explore all the work's aspects; it only provides an overview of one of its distinctive features.

1. The *St. Matthew Passion* and the Passion genre

The Passion is a musical setting of the story of Christ's arrest, trial and crucifixion, intended as an elaboration of the Gospel reading in the Easter liturgy. Since 1650, such settings increasingly reflected the influence of the oratorio genre, and the story has often been surrounded by non-narrative texts which reflect upon its significance for "present-day" Christian believers.

In some cases, the function of "Gospel reading" was compromised: several 18th-century Passion-Oratorio libretti (the most famous being a 1712 poem by Barthold Heinrich Brockes, set to music by Handel, Telemann, Stölzel and others) replaced the

Gospel narrative with a newly-written paraphrase, incorporating events from all four Gospels. In Bach's surviving Passions, however, the narrative derives exclusively from the scriptures.

The *St. Matthew Passion* consists of a complete musical setting of chapters 26 and 27 of *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, in Martin Luther's translation, interspersed with Lutheran chorales, choruses, ariosi (or *accompagnato* recitatives) and arias. It was written for the Good Friday Vespers Service, and divided into two parts, to be performed, respectively, before and after the sermon. The chorales' texts and melodies date from the 16th and 17th centuries; the other non-narrative texts were written by Bach's contemporary and compatriot, the Leipzig poet Christian Friedrich Henrici (known by his pen-name Picander).

The work was probably premiered in Leipzig in 1727; it underwent some revisions in two subsequent performances, in 1729 and 1736. For the latter, Bach prepared a new copy of the score and parts. According to Christoph Wolff (p. 298), none of Bach's other manuscript scores "is so carefully laid out". Throughout the rest of his life, Bach took great care to preserve this manuscript and repair it when it was damaged, demonstrating that he "considered this score as his most significant work".

Bach's Passions, like those of his contemporaries, combine disparate genres, from traditional chorale harmonisations to operatic recitatives and arias. Bach, however, was more keen to forge links and connection between these genres. He explores the full potential of diverse vocal and instrumental sonorities and a wide range of textures; the use of two choirs and orchestras made it possible to employ antiphonal dialogues, and to juxtapose disparate genres (e.g., chorale and aria). As Christoph Wolff points out, the resulting work has an encyclopaedic breadth comparable to that of Bach's great instrumental collections. The ultimate aim, however, was to explore "the widest possible range of musical expression": technical mastery, stylistic variety and musical complexity were all placed at the service of conveying complex, multi-faceted emotional messages.

2. The drama-within-a-drama

Bach's Passions and cantatas are frequently described as sermons-in-music, intended to guide the congregation towards an appropriate response to the Gospel reading (some portions of Picander's libretto are based on sermons by the 17th-century

theologian Heinrich Mueller). Within the Lutheran tradition, “any reading of the Bible was considered already an interpretation, and Bach and his librettists seem to have gone out of their way to embellish the story rhetorically” (John Butt, “Bach’s vocal scoring”, p. 104).

In doing so, however, Bach and Picander did not adopt the persona of a pulpit preacher. The speakers in Picander’s poems do not exhort the audience to think or act in particular ways. Instead, they present the reactions of ordinary believers to the unfolding events, and the congregation is implicitly invited to share these reactions through contemplation and identification.

There is, thus, a dual drama in the *St. Matthew Passion*: on the one hand, the story of Christ’s capture, trial, suffering and death; on the other hand, the psychological drama of the Christian believers’ response to the story. There is, however, a clear hierarchy, in which the latter drama takes precedence. The Gospel narrative is framed by the commentary; both parts of the *Passion* begin and end in non-narrative texts. The Gospel readings themselves are performed by the present-day believers, and thus become part of “their” drama.

This becomes particularly clear when the work is performed in what was probably its original scoring (according to the research of Joshua Rifkin and Andrew Parrott): eight singers, divided into two choirs, sing all the choruses and the vast majority of the solo parts (extra singers performed some of the smaller roles, but they did not take part in the choruses and chorales); they tell the story **and** react to it.

The part which Bach labelled “Christus”, for example, actually encompassed all the bass lines in Choir I. Consequently, the singer who enunciates Christ’s words makes his first appearance in the opening chorus, mourning Christ; joins Christ’s disciples and persecutors alike; takes part in the chorales; and expresses his own response to the story in two arias (see below).

Most recordings separate the soloists from the choir (the one exception being Paul McCreesh’s one-voice-per-part version on Archiv). Even in these recordings, however, the choir itself constantly changes its identity – portraying Christ’s disciples and persecutors in the narrative portions, and present-day Christian believers in the choruses and chorales.

In sum, the drama in *St. Matthew Passion* is not so much Christ’s Passion as a particular **telling** of Christ’s Passion; not so much the events themselves as the

Christian believer's highly personalised, emotional grappling with their significance. The believers become *dramatis personae* in their own right; in text and music alike, their reactions are often portrayed in more subjective, dramatic terms than those of the story that they narrate and enact. This is clear from the very beginning, in the contrast between the intensity of the opening chorus and the relative austerity of the Evangelist's opening phrases.

3. Setting the scene: The opening chorus

The opening chorus – “Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen” (“Come, ye daughters, help me mourn”) – is emblematic of the work as a whole, both in terms of its expressive content and in terms of the style and thematic materials it employs. This chorus is one of Bach's longest choral movements, and presents the full ensemble: two four-part choirs, each accompanied by a separate orchestra, and joined by a third group of singers (“soprani in ripieno”) who intone, in unison, the *Agnus dei* chorale, “O Lamm Gottes unschuldig” (“O guiltless Lamb of God”).

The two choirs are in direct dialogue: Choir I exhorts Choir II to reflect upon Christ's innocence and their own guilt. This emphasises both a structural principle in the work (dialogues between the two choirs will play a crucial role in several later movements) and one of its principal messages. The chorale conveys a similar message, though in it, the congregation addresses Christ, rather than each other.

Carl Dahlhaus cites this movement in his *Aesthetics of Music* as typifying the very essence of musical greatness: the combination of “the idea of monumentality” with “the idea of difficulty, of not immediate accessibility” (p. 90). This larger-than-life image contrasts markedly with the views of writers like Albert Schweitzer, who perceives this chorus as predominantly dramatic. Bach, he writes,

saw Jesus being led through the town to the cross; his eye caught the sight of the crowd surging through the streets; he heard them calling to and answering each other. [The music thus] depicts a crowd moving excitedly about, crying aloud, roaring. (*J. S. Bach*, vol. II, p. 211)

Others employ more temperate, measured imagery. Wolff, for example, likens this movement to “a French tombeau” or “a funeral march” (p. 302).

The chorale links the movement with the work's liturgical context (as John Butt points out, this particular chorale was central to the Lutheran Easter liturgy). It also creates a sense of tonal ambiguity, its G major shining above the chorus's E minor.

This intensifies an expressive ambiguity – the interleaving of lamentation and despair (the natural response to the unfolding tragedy, and to the believers’ reflection upon their complicity in it) with hope and gladness (at the salvation promised by Christ’s sacrifice). However, the forces are not evenly balanced: the movement is predominantly tragic. This, too, prefigures the rest of the work.

4. Telling the story

The libretto presents the story in the form of an unabridged biblical text, narrated by the tenor of Choir I. This Evangelist only falls silent when the Gospel quotes the statements of *dramatis personae* in direct speech; these statements are sung by extra soloists (sometimes referred to as *soliloquentes*) or by the choir. The Evangelist’s presence, however, makes it clear that we are witnessing the reading of a text, not the enactment of a play: when characters converse, the Evangelist intrudes between them, if only to say things like “he said”.

This was not the only option available to a German Lutheran composer setting the Passion story. In Brockes’s passion libretto, for example, the story is part-narrated, part-enacted. The narrator falls silent during dialogues; several of the arias are directly assigned to characters in the story (e.g., Peter, the Virgin Mary and Jesus himself). In Bach’s surviving Passions, however, the arias are clearly set apart from the narrative, and the latter is rendered, for the most part, with an expressive restraint befitting the style of a biblical narrative.

a) The Evangelist and *Soliloquentes*

The Evangelist’s words, and those of most of the *soliloquentes*, are set in so-called *recitativo secco* or *recitativo semplice* (“simple” or “dry” recitative): a single singer, accompanied only by continuo. These terms do little justice to the recitatives’ expressive eloquence and complexity. The “simple recitative” originated in the intense declamatory-rhetorical style of the early 17th-century *seconda pratica*, and affective recitative writing remained central to the best operas and cantatas of Bach’s time.

The Evangelist is frequently charged with the narrative’s expressive power: the *soliloquentes* sing the characters’ words, but the Evangelist describes their actions and

emotions. His text is therefore delivered “with the same fervent utterance as the speeches of individuals”:

Throughout the Evangelist’s narrative we may note an emotional unctio which often is nothing more than this, but often, on the contrary, is concentrated in a special sentiment. The agony and terrors of Christ in Gethsemane, Peter’s bitter tears of repentance, and Christ’s Crucifixion are not so much related by the Evangelist as experienced by him, with all the devout fervour of the sympathising Christians. (Spitta, vol. II, p. 543)

Spitta characterised Bach’s recitatives as “a musical improvisation under dramatic conditions” (ibid). They are mostly syllabic, giving a sense of speech-like rhythmic freedom, and contain few rhythmic-melodic formulas or repetitions. This allows for seemingly effortless transitions between different harmonies, tonalities, tempi and types of melodic writing – from flowing, lyrical phrases to harsh, angular ones, tinged with chromaticism or dissonant leaps. The Evangelist can employ an almost matter-of-fact tone in less emotionally charged passages, moving gradually to greater expressive urgency according to the demands of the text. Thus, he introduces Jesus’s arrival at Gethsemane (no. 18) in an austere yet lyrical style; harmonic tension, however, increases as he names the disciples who went with Jesus, and the words “fing an zu trauern” (“began to be sorrowful”) are subtly but clearly underlined by a chromatic setting, whose melismatic character stands out in an otherwise syllabic context. Likewise, the distinctive rhythmic figure in the accompanying instruments stands out against the continuo’s otherwise austere character.

For the most part, the continuo employs the Baroque convention of “shortened accompaniment”, striking a brief note to indicate the harmonies and then falling silent until the next chord. This focuses the listener’s attention on the Evangelist, and emphasises the few cases where the continuo line is given a more active rhythmic pattern – for example, in the urgent, chromatic *tremolando* that underpins the Evangelist’s depiction of the cataclysmic events that followed Jesus’s death (no. 63a).

b) The characterisation of Jesus

The use of shortened accompaniment also emphasises the contrast between the “*secco*” recitative of the Evangelist and *soliloquentes* and the *accompagnato* setting of Christ’s words. With one exception, Christ’s utterances are accompanied by the strings of the first orchestra. His vocal line is often similar to the Evangelist’s; but the string accompaniment allows for a wider expressive and stylistic range. This is most

evident in the Institution of the Eucharist (no. 11): a prolonged, *arioso*-style, almost dance-like passage, with distinctive melodic figuration in the strings.

The strings are usually described as an aural equivalent to the halo which surrounds Christ's head in many visual representations. This effect is clearly evident when they play simple, homophonic chords. However, Bach frequently employs the strings to present dramatic word-paintings or to subtly delineate the mood.

One could even argue that the halo makes Christ more human, expressive and three-dimensional than the *soliloquentes*. This reflects the characterisation of Christ in the narrative, which presents him more as the Son of Man than as the Son of God. This is especially notable in the scenes on the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane, which vividly portray Jesus's torment and doubts, as he anticipates his abandonment by his disciples, and prays to be released from his impending suffering before accepting his fate. Bach's setting of Jesus's more anguished utterances is appropriately impassioned, and the strings' "halo" accentuates this, emphasising the often painful harmonies.

Thus, when Jesus says (in no. 18) "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto the death", the measured, contained pain is emphasised by the throbbing accompaniment of the strings, which remains even in the magical transition to the major on "tarry ye here and watch with Me". Harmonic tension and rhythmic restlessness affect his line in his subsequent prayers, and his admonishments of his sleeping disciples.

The halo serves a dramatic-symbolic function even in the one place where it is omitted: Jesus's final words, "Eli, Eli, lama asabtani" ("My God, why hast thou forsaken me", in no. 61a). The halo's absence at this point might symbolise Jesus's sense of having been abandoned by God.

Bach's music thus presents Jesus as a human being, who is willing to sacrifice himself for humanity's salvation despite his evident doubts and anxieties. His courage in doing so is all the more palpable when set against the reality of his suffering.

c) The role of the choir

Direct-speech quotations spoken by a group – the disciples, the crowd, and so forth – are allocated to the choir, doubled or accompanied by the orchestra. Small groups (e.g., the disciples) are allocated to one choir only; larger groups are

represented by both choirs, in unison or in dialogue. Most of these “crowd”, or *turba*, choruses are polyphonic, and often feature complex imitative textures.

The narrative choruses cover a wide expressive range, from the lyricism of some of the disciples’ statements to the awe-inspired “Wahrlich, dieser ist Gottes Sohn Gewesen” (“Truly this was the Son of God”, no. 63b), sung by the onlookers in Golgotha as they recognise Christ’s true identity. Most choruses, however, are allocated to Christ’s persecutors, and often acquire a ferocious character. A typical example is the vehement, harsh, tonally-wayward fugal setting of “Laß ihn kreuzigen” (“Let him be crucified!”, no. 45b), whose power is intensified by its contrast with its immediate surroundings.

At its first appearance, this aggressive chorus is followed by the chorale “Wie wunderbarlich ist doch diese Strafe” (“How miraculous indeed is this punishment”, no. 46). Bach’s harmonisation opens with tense chromaticism, which gradually subsides towards a tranquil conclusion: it thus creates a transition from the harshness of the *turba* to the brief lyrical recitative where Pilate asks “What evil hath He done” (no. 47), and the soprano answers him with her arioso “Er hat uns allen Wohlgetan” (“He has done good to us all”, no. 48).

Thus, a quick succession of movements leads the listeners from one of the work’s most violent sound pictures to one of its most beautiful movements: an aria which focuses on Christ’s innocence and divine love (“Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben” – “Out of love my saviour is willing to die”, no. 49). The harshness and instability of the crowd’s blood-thirsty cry is answered by a static aria whose scoring (a soprano and flute supported only by oboi da caccia, without continuo) sounds almost ethereal – and painfully fragile. And, indeed, the aria is rudely shattered when the same strident chorus is repeated a tone higher (no. 50b), to illustrate the Evangelist’s words “But they cried out the more”.

Especially in its second appearance, this chorus creates the terrifying impression of a callous mob, blinded and deafened by hate, angrily rejecting the beautiful innocence of “Aus Liebe”. Here and elsewhere, the characterisation of the narrative is deeply enmeshed with the expressive qualities of the non-narrative portions.

5. Responding to the story

The story is framed and interrupted by extraneous texts which, for the most part, adopt the viewpoint of contemporary Christian believers, reflecting their response to the story (compassion for Jesus, a desire to save him, and anger at his persecutors) and their contemplation of its ultimate significance (remorse for their sins, and gladness at the salvation which that sacrifice promises to them). The tension between these reactions is perhaps the most central drama of the *Passion*.

a) The Chorales

The chorales were familiar to Bach's congregation as part of their regular church services. The congregation did not sing the chorales **during** the performance of the *Passion*: such communal singing would have obscured Bach's harmonisations, as well as the subtle changes he introduced at times into the melodies themselves. Nonetheless, the chorales could be viewed as symbolising the congregation's response to the Passion story, and as a constant reminder of the drama's liturgical setting.

The hymn most frequently used in the *St. Matthew Passion* is "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden", which recurs five times in the work, in four contrasting harmonisations. Consider, for example, its two last appearances. "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden" ("O head, full of blood and wounds", no. 54), responds to the narrative verse "And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head". This verse is set, as Thomas Seedorf notes, "in a particularly high register". Here, "the congregation reacts to the humiliation of Christ by its musical elevation of him". This sentiment is expressed primarily in the first verse; however, the same bright harmonisation sounds equally convincing when it is repeated, to a verse which expresses compassion for Christ's suffering.

The same melody reappears immediately after Christ's death; in the chosen verse ("Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden" – "When once I must depart", no. 62), the believer asks Christ to stand by him when his own death comes. Here, the chorale appears in an especially low register, the sense of darkness further intensified by the chromatic, modulatory harmonisation. The chorale ends in tonal ambiguity, "as if the believer were doubting for a moment his ability to overcome the supreme terror on the day when he too 'must depart'" (Seedorf).

Both these verses arguably serve as points of rest and contemplation within the narrative. This is sometimes described as the function of all chorales. Philippe Herreweghe, for example, claims that the chorales

are related to the action as a dream is related to life: without really being part of it, they gather up and reveal all its meaning. That is why we have chosen a rather slow-paced declamation, subjective but outside *dramatic time*, giving silence time to speak. (“Bach and musical rhetoric”, p. 33)

In his 1985 performance, this approach is further intensified through the consistent treatment of the fermatas, which appear at the end of each chorale verse: Herreweghe, like many before him, interprets these fermatas as an injunction to hold the last note (in his second recording, he applies a more flexible approach). John Eliot Gardiner, on the other hand, treats the fermatas as breath-marks. In his view, the chorales are often related directly to the plot, a view which is frequently reflected in the brief pauses he adopts between chorales and adjacent numbers.

Historical arguments have been cited in favour of both approaches; personally, I prefer those performances which treat fermatas flexibly, with due attention to the harmonic and expressive character of each phrase. Gardiner’s fermata-as-breath approach, however, is persuasive when the chorales respond immediately to events in the narrative, almost becoming part of the drama – as in the chorale “Ich bin’s, ich sollte büßen” (“It is I, I should atone”, no. 10) in the Last Supper scene. Jesus has just told his disciples that one of them would betray him, and they ask: “Lord, is it I?”. Choir I intones the question 11 times, to indicate that all the disciples have asked this – except for Judas, the actual betrayer. But immediately, the two choirs answer the question: “It is I [the Christian sinner-believer]” who is truly responsible. This chorale appears **before** Judas supplies the twelfth question in the narrative; the believers’ admission of their own complicity thus pre-empts Judas’s.

b) Picander’s libretto

Picander’s libretto – the choruses, ariosi and arias written expressly for the *St. Matthew Passion* – is characterised by highly personalised and colourful imagery, contrasting markedly with the restraint of the Gospel narrative. Bach’s music matches Picander’s images with detailed word-paintings and intensely expressive, sometimes operatic writing.

Most ariosi and arias are written in the first-person singular. The emotions are as intense as if the events are being witnessed here-and-now, yet the contents reveal an

element of hindsight: as they reflect on the unfolding tragedy, the believers also remember that Christ's death is essential for their salvation, and seek consolation in the Passion narrative. This consolation, however, is tinged with remorse, compassion, and a willingness to be worthy of the sacrifice by striving to imitate Christ's example – as well as anger at Christ's persecutors.

Outbursts of anger in non-narrative portions of the *St. Matthew Passion* are rare but powerful. The most terrifying is “So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen” (“So is my Jesus captured now”, no. 27). This opens as a quiet duet – the soprano and alto of Choir I lamenting Jesus's arrest – interrupted by cries of “Release him! Do not bind him!” from Choir II. At first, sorrow and anger are pitted against each other, but then anger overwhelms all other emotions: the two choirs join together, demanding that thunders, lightning and Hell's abyss “wreck, ruin, engulf, shatter” the perpetrators in an ill-conceived wish to save Jesus (ill-conceived because salvation depends upon the Crucifixion). In their vengeful fury, the believers ironically resemble Christ's persecutors: their music is at least as terrifying as that of the most violent *turba* choruses.

In the next narrative scene (no. 28), Christ himself rejects this vehement reaction. He stops his own disciples when they attempt to defend him by force (“all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword”), and states that he could have called upon divine protection, “But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled that thus it must be?” This scene leads to the chorale-fantasia “O Mensch beweine deine Sünde groß” (“O Man, bewail your great sin”, no. 29) which concludes Part One: the believers who have just condemned Christ's erstwhile persecutors now acknowledge their own guilt.

In this case, the musical drama is created through the contrast between clearly identifiable affects. Elsewhere, however, Bach's music movingly represents the individual believer's ambiguous or conflicting reactions to the narrative. For example, in the recitative-and-aria “O Schmerz” / “Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen” (“O pain!” / “I wish to watch beside my Jesus”, nos. 19-20), Bach exploits the dialogue principle to introduce a polyvalent response to Christ's agony in Gethsemane.

The tenor opens his recitative with a passionate cry whose pained intensity exceeds anything in the narrative itself. Choir II responds with a gently ornamented chorale, in which they acknowledge that they, as sinners, are “the cause of all this

woe”. In the following aria, the contrast between tenor and choir diminishes, as both of them reflect on the strange mixture of joy and mourning which accompanies their contemplation of Christ’s suffering; the lyrical, melancholy music creates a poised balance between these ostensibly opposite emotions.

The speakers’ desire, here and elsewhere, is to do what the characters in the narrative have failed to do: the disciples, after all, did **not** watch besides Jesus. This introduces the theme of human frailty, which, according to John Butt, is explored in at least two key junctures in the work.

The first is the alto aria “Erbarme dich” (“Have mercy”, no. 39), which responds to Peter’s denial of Christ and his horror as he realises what he had done. The violin figures in this aria are often interpreted as describing Peter’s weeping; Butt offers a different (though not necessarily irreconcilable) interpretation. He points out that the aria’s melody is only presented in full by the violin; the alto usually sings a simplified, fragmented version. The violin’s line serves as “a model of musical perfection [...] to which a human (i.e. the singer) aspires without ever quite succeeding” (“Bach in the twenty-first century”, p. 202).

A similar musical illustration can be found in the aria “Komm, süßes Kreuz” (“Come, sweet Cross”, no. 57), originally allocated to the same singer who sang the words of Christ, and who now expresses his desire to carry Christ’s cross, as Simon of Cyrene has done in the preceding narrative scene. The weight of the Cross is palpable in the vocal and instrumental lines; the difficulty of the gamba part “must surely relate to the difficulty of carrying the cross and of the imitation of Christ in the more general sense” (“Bach in the twenty-first century”, p. 202).

There is also, however, a sense of beauty and hope in this aria, which is even more pronounced in subsequent arias: as Christ’s death approaches, the arias become increasingly optimistic. The alto arioso “Ach Golgatha” (no. 59) is dramatically painful, but its tormented character is mitigated in the following aria-and-chorus (“Sehet, Jesus hat die Hand” – “See, Jesus had His hand”, no. 60). The alto sees in Christ’s arms, outstretched on the Cross, the promise of salvation, and calls upon the Faithful (sung by Choir II) to accept his embrace. Their dialogue, though tinged by dissonants and by the darkened timbre of the oboes da caccia, still conveys a sense of urgent, hopeful excitement.

This sentiment reaches its apogee in the final recitative-and-aria sequence – “Am Abend”/ “Mache dich” – again sung by the same singer as Christ. A sense of foreboding affects the introductory arioso, “Am Abend” (“In the evening”, no. 64), but it is gradually lifted. The following aria, “Mache dich, mein Herze, rein” (“Make thyself clean, my heart”, no. 65), is profoundly joyous, expressing ecstatic serenity as the speaker prepares to rid himself of earthy distractions and embrace Jesus into his heart. There is virtually no hint here of the pain and doubt that affected earlier arias: the music seems to accept wholeheartedly that the sacrifice has accomplished its aim, that salvation is indeed at hand.

However, the arias’ growing optimism is checked by the music that surrounds them: the violence of Christ’s mockers at Golgotha; Christ’s painful parting from the world; the tense, open-ended character of the last chorale. Nor is the joy of “Mache dich” sustained afterwards: the final recitative-and-chorus revert back to the sense of tragedy that was felt from the very beginning of the work.

In the *St. John Passion*, the last aria (“Zerfließe, mein Herze” – “Melt, my heart”, no. 35) mournfully declares “My Jesus is dead”. The last chorus, however, sings “Rest in peace, you holy bones, which I will now on longer mourn” (“Ruht wohl”, no. 39), in music of simple, restrained sadness – and the concluding chorale has an almost triumphant, major-key ending. The *St. Matthew Passion* exhibits the opposite pattern. The joy of the final aria is dispelled in the last narrative scene; and the increasingly mournful final arioso leads to the intense lament “Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder” (“We sit down in tears”, no. 68) which closes the work.

The words of this da-capo chorus offer a glimmer of hope, especially in the middle section:

Your grave and tombstone/ Shall for the unquiet conscience /Be a comfortable
pillow/ And the soul’s resting place. / In utmost bliss the eyes slumber there.

Bach’s music, however, is suffused with mourning: painful harmonies, sighing figures, descending phrases. In the ‘b’ section, one can sense the striving towards “rest” and “bliss” – but not their achievement. The section builds up towards a high-point on the words “Höchst Vergnügt” – literally, “highest bliss”; but the word “bliss” is undermined by the increasingly painful harmonies. The words allude to the promise of peace and salvation; but the music retains a tragic aura to the very end.

This difference between Bach’s two *Passions* mirrors the difference between their respective narratives. In *St. John’s Gospel*, Christ accepts his fate boldly and

impassively, and his last words are “It is fulfilled”. In *St. Matthew’s*, his doubts and suffering are palpably exposed, and his last words are “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”. The latter narrative inspired Bach to write one of the greatest tragedies in musical history. The work movingly explores the emotions associated with the promise of salvation; but it ultimately focuses upon the believers’ remorse and their painful sympathy with Jesus’s suffering.

Perhaps this partly explains why the *St. Matthew Passion* continues to inspire admiration and devotion even among people (like the present writer) who do not share Bach’s spiritual and religious outlook. Many listeners, of course, are drawn in by the music’s sophistication, beauty and depth – qualities that the *Passion* shares with Bach’s most profound instrumental works. But the fact that the *Passion* ultimately focuses upon mercy, compassion and humanity – not rage or unattainable divinity – makes it easier for listeners of diverse backgrounds and creeds to identify with it.

* The translations of the libretto cited in this article are based on translations included in the liner notes of Philippe Herreweghe’s recordings (Harmonia Mundi France).

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Introduction

This discography only includes recent period-instruments versions; it does not aim to represent the work's rich and varied history on record. I do not wish to belittle the contribution of traditional performances to our understanding of this work: Jochum, Richter and Klemperer (among others) have directed moving performances, effectively communicating the music's depth and grandeur. Their monumental approach, however, sometimes missed the humane side of Bach's musical drama.

In the notes to his first recording of the *Passion*, Philippe Herreweghe states that he and his musicians aimed to do justice to Bach's intense musical rhetoric: "We therefore eschewed a certain 'profundity', a certain static, speciously tragic grandiloquence in favour of the discourse, the drama and the kaleidoscope of human passions". The recordings listed below reflect similar priorities. I ended up making very similar choices to those of Bernard Sherman, and I strongly recommend his article (<http://www.bsherman.org/StMatthew.htm>) as a complement to this necessarily sketchy discography.

Since I was restricted to four recordings, I was obviously forced to omit several excellent performances, most notably Gustav Leonhardt's on Deutsche Harmonia Mundi. I must also mention Paul McCreech's version on Archiv – to date, the only recording that employs the one-per-part ensemble which Bach himself probably envisioned for this work. McCreech's superb vocal team proves that this "minimalist" scoring can be extraordinarily effective. The performance is marred, however, by reticent playing: all too often, the orchestra passively accompanies the singers instead of engaging in active dialogue with them, as Bach's intricate textures demand. McCreech is one of several performers who accepted Joshua Rifkin's research on Bach's vocal scoring; we still await recordings of the *St. Matthew Passion* by Andrew Parrott, Sigiswald Kuijken, Konrad Junghänel and Rifkin himself.

John Eliot Gardiner

Anthony Rolfe-Johnson (Evangelist); Andreas Schmidt (Jesus); Barbara Bonney and Ann Monoyios (soprani), Anne Sofie von Otter (contralto), Michael Chance (alto), Howard Crook (tenor), Olaf Bär (baritone), Cornelius Hauptmann (bass)/ The London Oratory Junior Choir, The Monteverdi Choir, The English Baroque Soloists/ John Eliot Gardiner.

3 CDs. Archiv Produktion 427 648-2. Recorded 1988. Also available as part of a 9-CD set of Bach's Sacred Choral Works conducted by John Eliot Gardiner (together with the *St. John Passion*, *B minor Mass* and *Christmas Oratorio*); Archiv Produktion Collectors' Edition 469 769-2.

Four stars

Gardiner's hallmark is dramatic immediacy. His tempi are frequently on the fast side; even slower movements are often projected with a compelling sense of direction and momentum. The incisive precision of the virtuosic ensembles ensures textural clarity throughout. Gardiner achieves a remarkable combination of contrast and continuity. For example, his biting, aggressive *turbas* are often followed by flexible renderings of the adjacent chorales, marked by soft sonorities and rounded phrasing; but the chorales still maintain the *turbas*' fast tempi.

Occasionally, this approach leads to a hectic, breathless interpretation. For the most part, however, Gardiner's clear architectural grasp insures that faster tempi are placed in the service of a cohesive conception; and he allows ample breathing space for his excellent soloists in many of the arias.

Anthony Rolfe-Johnson is one of the most contemplative, lyrical Evangelists on record, rarely resorting to the sharp, biting approach that characterises several renowned exponents of this role. He is acutely responsive to his surroundings, and his voice acquires a sharper, harsher tone when he introduces the *turbas*. Elsewhere, his restrained narrative provides an effective foil to Gardiner's vivid enactment of the *Passion*'s dual drama.

Philippe Herreweghe

Ian Bostridge (Evangelist), Franz-Josef Selig (Jesus)/ Sibylla Rubens (soprano), Andreas Scholl (alto), Werner Güra (tenor), Dietrich Henschel (bass)/ Schola Cantorum Cantate Collegium Vocale.

3 CDs; Harmonia Mundi HMC 951676.78. Recorded 1998.

Five stars; Critic's Choice

This performance is more energetic and dramatic than Herreweghe's excellent 1985 version. Here, Herreweghe and his musicians employ broader, more *legato* phrases, allowing moments of sharper accentuation to stand out more vividly; the range of dynamics and timbres is notably wider. The performance achieves a sense of dramatic continuity without abandoning the reflective element; the urgency of the opening chorus and the sharp bite of many *turbas* are balanced by the contemplative chorales and by the melancholy lyricism of many of the arias.

In the excellent line-up of soloists, the most unique contribution is Ian Bostridge's bold, colourful reading of the Evangelist's lines, ranging from biting anger and sarcasm (as in his account of Christ's mockers in Golgotha) to intense, pained lyricism (as in his account of Peter's weeping).

The accompanying CD-ROM contains a superb introduction to the work (a few technical glitches notwithstanding) – from a general background of the genre's history to an illuminating movement-by-movement analysis. There is also fascinating interview with Herreweghe, who also appears in several video segments, complementing Thomas Seedorf's analysis of some of the movements.

Masaaki Suzuki

Gerd Türk (Evangelist), Peter Kooy (Jesus)/ Nancy Argenta (soprano), Robin Blaze (alto), Makoto Sakurada (tenor), Chiyuki Urano (bass)/ Shizuoka Children's Choir, Collegium Bach Japan/ Masaaki Suzuki.

3 CDs; BIS-CD 1000/1002. Also available as part of a 3-for-5 set, coupled with Suzuki's recording of the *St. John Passion*; BIS-CD-1342/44. Recorded 1999.

Five stars

Simon Heighes likened this recording to “that live performance you hear once in a lifetime and only wish someone has recorded (warts and all)”. Suzuki's choir produces a rounded, mellifluous sound, but the orchestral sonority is sometimes gritty and rough. The soloists, too, avoid the sensuous production and quasi-operatic projection that characterises many of their counterparts in rival recordings. Instead, they credibly portray the story-telling and sincere responses of “ordinary” Christian believers. But they are also acutely sensitive to the role of believers as *dramatis personae*, responding to the music's expressive nuances with a compelling combination of spontaneous freshness and thoughtful subtlety.

Gerd Türk enunciates the Evangelist's lines with improvisatory rhythmic freedom; his dynamic range may be narrower than Bostridge's, but he clearly underlines key words and moments through subtle inflections of timing, intonation and phrasing. Peter Kooy, strongly supported by his accompanists, projects a touchingly humane portrayal of Jesus, alternately impassioned and vulnerable, imperious and resigned. This portrait fits movingly into the spirit of this performance, whose incidental imperfections only serve to intensify its humane characterisation of the work. Several other recordings present convincing, moving interpretations of the *St. Matthew Passion*, but few (if any) rival the sense of direct involvement and intimate identification which this performance inspires.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt

Christoph Prégardien (Evangelist), Matthias Goerne (Jesus)/ Christine Schäfer and Dorothea Röschmann (soprani), Bernard Fink and Elisabeth von Magnus (contralti), Michael Schade and Markus Schäfer (tenors), Dietrich Henschel and Oliver Widmer (basses)/ Wiener Sängerknaben, Arnold Schoenberg Chor, Concentus Musicus Wien/ Nikolaus Harnoncourt.

3 CDs; Teldec 8573-81036-2. recorded 2000. 3rd CD includes a CD-ROM facsimile of Bach's 1736 autograph score.

Five stars

In 1970, Nikolaus Harnoncourt directed the first period-instrument recording of the *St. Matthew Passion* – a moving performance which still has much to commend it. Since then, he has conducted the work frequently with period- and modern-instrument ensembles alike. This performance reflects his creative synthesis of diverse influences – from his imaginative vision of Baroque musical rhetoric to his deep immersion in “traditional” or “mainstream” performance.

Harnoncourt's choir and orchestra are larger than in most period-instrument versions; they produce a rich, sensuous sonority reminiscent of traditional ensembles, further enhanced by Harnoncourt's frequent use of *legato* articulation. This remains, however, one of the most volatile readings of this work: Harnoncourt's belief that Bach's most minute figures have rhetorical significance inspires a searching, probing performance in which no phrase is left uninflected. There is a sense of subtle momentum and constant flux, and many arias are sung with recitative-like rhythmic suppleness (the alto Bernarda Fink is particularly persuasive and moving). This intensifies the work's unity, as the arias are brought closer to the narrative portions (themselves narrated with compelling dramatic flexibility by Christoph Prégardien, complemented by Matthias Goerne's imperious yet supple portrayal of Jesus). At their best, Harnoncourt and his musicians achieve the seemingly impossible combination of a fascinating analysis-in-sound with an overall sense of inexorable, dramatic urgency.

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