

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

JOHANNES-PASSION

The Passion According to St. John

Evangelium

Einmal ist er abgefahren, und hat sich nicht umgesehen.

Chor



Broadway Symphony/Seattle Chamber Singers
George Shangrow, conductor

February 24, 1985

3:00 p.m.

Meany Hall, U.W.

PROGRAM NOTES by George Shangrow

The Passion story has been presented in Christian churches since the 4th Century. These presentations were in dramatic form with several readers handling the different characters: Christ, the Evangelist, the various individuals, and the crowd (*turba*). As early as the 9th century instructions as to interpretation appear: moving, held back, and to be sung higher. And around this same time the tradition that the Evangelist be sung by a tenor or higher voice and the Christ be sung by a bass or lower voice was established. The Passion story was presented between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday and in Leipzig was used for the Good Friday vespers service.

The Lutheran church continued the Roman tradition of not allowing elaborate music during the six weeks of Lent. This obviously proved a boon for church composers because it allowed a large amount of time and concentration for the large works needed for Passion and Easter time. With the St. John Passion, Bach presented his first major work during his new job as Cantor of St. Thomas Church. He probably composed some of the work during his time at Kothen — incorporating many of the techniques of instrumental and chamber composition he had developed there — but the bulk of the work was composed during the three weeks prior to the presentation.

Of the five Passion settings composed by Bach, only the St. John and the St. Matthew remain intact. Bach himself repeatedly performed only these two works so it would seem that the loss of the works may not be so much a problem. Scholars feel that Bach did not think the other works were as good as the two mentioned and that he probably took the more valuable movements and sections from them and used them in other pieces. The change to a grand setting of the Passion with choruses, arias, different singers, and large instrumental forces came as a result of the creation of opera, oratorio, and cantata forms in the 17th century. The devices of monody accompanied by continuo or orchestra (*recitative* and *accompagnato*), arias with *obbligato* instruments, extensive choral movements, and polyphonic arrangements of choral melodies were all adopted for use in the Passion settings.

The recitative obviously advances the story. In the St. John Passion the Evangelist, Christ, and all the other individual characters are sung the *recitativo secco*

(only keyboard and cello). The chorus writing is one of the great features of this Passion. The *turba* choruses (crowd scenes) during the second part of the work provide a dramatic setting in the Judgement Hall unseen in any setting of the Passion before or since. The chorale settings form a sort of idealized congregation — in Bach's time it is probable that the congregation sang along on the chorale melody. The texts of the chorales reflect the personal feelings of the listeners as a reaction to the story at any given time.

The arias are musical settings where text and music combine to isolate and explore a single emotional idea in a self-contained form. These works heighten the story in an emotional way that relates directly to the Gospel story but has text from another source. There are a number of librettists that have written texts for the Passions, but by far the most well known of these is Barthold Heinrich Brockes. Settings of Brockes Passion have been composed by Händel, Telemann, Keiser, and Mattheson — all of them famous at the time — and all performed in Hamburg on four different days of Holy Week in 1719!

The musical form of the work does not well conform to that of the Gospel text. It is through the genius of Bach, not St. John, that the work as a whole has a form and is so well able to convey the emotion inherent in the meaning of the Gospel. The center of the work is the chorale “Durch dein Gefagnis...” which contains the text central to the understanding and religious meaning of the Passion. Around this chorale the various choruses form a large frame. The music of the surrounding choruses is virtually identical with different texts. The relationships between the texts of the similar choruses is an interesting one from an emotional point of view which the listener should investigate.

The choruses “Wir haben ein Gesetz” and “Lassest du diesen los” frame the central chorale. It always feels to me that the height of dramatic irony is displayed here in the inflexibility of humankind. Outside of these two works are the crucify choruses, “Kreuzige, Kreuzige” and “Weg, weg mit dem”. Framing these are two sets of pieces. The earlier one starting with “Nicht diesen, sondern Barrabam!” continues with the beautiful and reflective “Betrachte” and the amazing tenor aria “Erwäge”. This first set concludes with the mocking chorus

Johann Sebastian Bach
1685–1750

JOHANNES-PASSION

The Passion According to St. John
BWV 245

The Evangelist Paul Anderson

Jesus Michael Delos

Pontius Pilate Timothy Braun

Marianne Weltmann
soprano

Louise Marley
mezzo-soprano

Barton Green
tenor

Peter Kechley
bass

"Sei gegrusset" where the soldiers bow and curtsy to Christ referring to him as the "King of the Jews" in a very nasty way (as represented in the fast wind parts.)

The corresponding set after the "Weg, weg" chorus begins with "Wir haben keinen Konig" — certainly a musical reflection of the Barrabam chorus and a textual reinforcement. The following aria for bass "Eilt" with its fascinating interjections by the chorus provides a dramatic directive towards Golgatha — and an almost direct opposite to the arias before mentioned. Finally, the chorus with the identical music to that of "Sei gegrusset" is the "Schreibe nicht" chorus where the crowd instructs Pilate not to put the inscription above the cross. Note the ironic combination with the "Greetings" chorus depicting the soldiers' earlier mocking. These choruses, and the two framing chorales "Ach, grosser Konig" and "In meines Herzens Grunde", form the great central core of the John Passion. As the framework extends, we see that the outer frames contain most of the arias and other chorales finally leading to the grand opening and closing choruses. Not included is the very last chorale "Ach Herr, lass dein lieb' Engelein". This very simple, straightforward statement Bach found to be the best way to contain or sum up the tremendous emotional content of the musical and scriptural work.

In listening to the Passions, as in listening to opera, it is important to follow the text translation. Bach is a master at setting text in recitative and so knowing what each word means as it is being sung can truly heighten the enjoyment of the music at the same time it gives a greater appreciation for Bach's genius. We perform the

work in German because Bach wrote it in German. The individual words do not fit with the musical intention when the work is performed in another language. The Evangelist needs to be regarded as storyteller supreme. The roles of the various personages and crowds are interjected at his commands, and, as in any good drama, cue pick up is the essence in conveying the emotional content. Bach's "lead-ins" to the various choruses are especially fine.

Although Bach made several changes to the St. John Passion, he ultimately returned to the original as he had composed it in 1723. This is unusual for Bach as most of the time he absolutely stuck with any revisions he had made. The work was done repeatedly by Bach in Leipzig over the next 27 years as was the St. Matthew Passion. For the John Passion, both Bach's score and the Leipzig performance materials have come down to us intact so scholars have the sources needed for accurate study of the work.

For today's performance we are using a chorus that would be perhaps one and one-half to two times the size of Bach's forces, and, accordingly, the orchestra is correspondingly larger. This decision is based partly on the musical demands of the work which make me think that if Bach had had available the larger forces he probably would have used them, and partly on the fact that our hall is much larger and has much drier acoustics than the St. Nicolas Church in Leipzig (where the work was first presented.)

We use the Barenreiter edition for today's performance. This is taken directly from the Neue Bach Gesellschaft.



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St. Matthew Passion

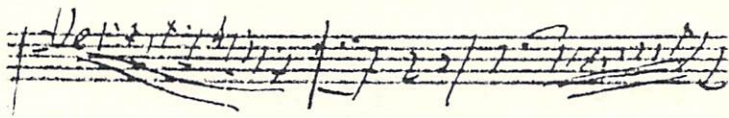
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Meany Hall, U.W.

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The Columbia Boys Choir

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Jesus: Peter Kechley
Soprano: Laurie Haney
Alto: Marcia Bellamy
Tenor: Charles Walker
Bass: Michael Delos

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George Shangrow, Harpsichord

March 24, 1985 — 8:00 p.m.

Wallingford United Methodist Church
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Charles Walker is a virtuoso performer of literature from the High Baroque. He last performed in Seattle in "The Ballad of Baby Doe" and is pleased to return for this recital, and for the tenor arias in the St. Matthew Passion.

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University Unitarian Church
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BWV 6: Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden

BWV 31: Der Himmel lacht, der Erde jubiliert

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Rossini: La Gazza Ladra Overture

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Brahms: Symphony No. IV

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Meany Hall

3:00 p.m.

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