

THE VOCAL MUSIC OF J.S. BACH¹

CLASS 10 Nov 23 ST. MATTHEW PASSION

Outline

1. Bach's 2 surviving passion settings; performance history of St. Matthew Passion.
2. The work itself: story, text, dramatic nature, performance forces, dramatic elements, integration of music with story.

History of the St. Matthew Passion. During the Middle Ages, many Christian churches observed Holy Week by presenting the story of Christ's suffering and death, with spoken excerpts from the New Testament gospels, and later adding melodies from Gregorian chant. By Bach's time, these musical passion stories ("passio" = suffering) had expanded to include religious poetry set to music, and performing forces could include multiple solo voices, a choir, organ, and orchestra. Even so, when Bach introduced his St. Matthew Passion to his Leipzig public, probably on Good Friday, 1727, it was the largest and most complex passion story in music ever conceived.

Bach evidently felt that his St. Matthew was the greatest of his passion settings (he wrote three others, of which only one survives), and one of his greatest creations in any medium. Notations on the manuscript indicate that it was referred to as "The Great Passion" in the Bach household. First performance perhaps Good Friday, 1727. Certainly performed on Good Friday 1729. Periodic revisions, last performance in Bach's lifetime Good Friday 1736. Probably more revisions but no other performance before Bach's death. Carefully preserved and distributed by Bach before his death. Rediscovery by Mendelssohn and revival with performance in 1829, sparking renewed interest in Bach's music. Text was written by Christian Henrici (pen name = Picander) who combined his own religion poetry with biblical texts and words from chorale tunes that would have been immediately familiar to his audience. Picander was an excellent librettist, and it seems that he and Bach worked together closely on the St. Matthew. Later generations are grateful that Bach had Picander to work with.

Heart of the work: Passion chorale

In an earlier class, we learned that chorales or hymns were a central element of worship in Reformation Germany. The chorale melodies that Bach used were generally familiar to his congregation, and often dated back many generations. At the heart of the St. Matthew Passion is one particular chorale melody, composed in the 16th century by Hans Leo Hassler. Over the course of the St. Matthew Passion, Bach sets this melody in five different places in the story, to five sets of words, harmonized five different ways. Here is the first version.

"Erkenne Mich, Mein Hüter," passion chorale, first version, No. 21

Erkenne mich, mein Hüter,
Mein Hirte, nimm mich an!
Von dir, Quell aller Güter,
Ist mir viel Guts getan.
Dein Mund hat mich gelabet
Mit Milch und süßer Kost,
Know me, my keeper,
Know me, my keeper,
My shepherd, take me to thee.
By thee, source of all good things,

Much good has befallen me.
Thy mouth has refreshed me
With milk and sweetmeats.

Dein Geist hat mich begabet
Mit mancher Himmelslust.

Thy spirit has favored me
With many a heavenly longing.

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The chorale is simple, requiring just a 4 part mixed chorus, but the St. Matthew as a whole required larger forces than perhaps anything written to that time: 2 choruses, a boys chorus, 2 full orchestras, organ, and a large assortment of soloists. For the performance on Good Friday in 1736, Bach had perhaps 60 musicians to work with, including some of his previous students who trekked back to Leipzig to add their talents to the performance. 60 musicians doesn't sound like a lot to modern concert goers, who are accustomed to orchestras of over 100 players for Mahler or Richard Strauss, or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir for Handel's Messiah, but 60 was probably the largest ensemble Bach ever directed.

The St. Matthew begins with one of the greatest opening choruses in the entire liturgical repertoire. Bach calls for two choruses, each with its own orchestra, plus a boy's choir. The orchestra opens with repeated low E's in the bass, in slow walking rhythm, bringing to mind the slow procession of Christ bearing the cross. Next we hear the two choruses, representing the community of believers. Chorus I calls out, "Come ye daughters, share my mourning, See!" Chorus II responds with a question, "Whom?" and Chorus I replies, "The bridegroom there." (Christ was often represented as a bridegroom, with the Christian community as the bride). Leonard Bernstein describes the effect:

"Suddenly the chorus breaks into two antiphonal choruses. 'See him!' cries the first one. 'Whom?' asks the second. And the first answers: 'The Bridegroom see. See Him!' 'How?' 'So like a Lamb.' And then over and against all this questioning and answering and throbbing, the voices of a boy's choir sing out the chorale tune, 'O Lamb of God Most Holy,' piercing through the worldly pain with the icy-clear truth of redemption. The contrapuntal combination of the three different choruses is thrilling. There is nothing like it in all music."

"Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen," chorus, No. 1

Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen! Sehet! Wen?
Den Bräutigam. Seht ihn! Wie? Als wie ein Lamm!
Sehet!
Was? Seht die Geduld. Seht!
Wohin? Auf unsre Schuld.
Sehet ihn aus Lieb und Huld Holz zum Kreuze
selber tragen!

Come, daughters, help me lament,
behold! - Whom? - the Bridegroom!
Behold Him! - How? - As a Lamb.
Behold! - What? - behold the patience,
look! - Where? - at our guilt.
See Him, out of love and graciousness
bear the wood for the Cross Himself.

O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig Am Stamm des
Kreuzes geschlachtet, Allzeit erfunden
geduldig, Wiewohl du warest verachtet. All Sund
hast du getragen, Sonst müßten wir verzagen.
Holz zum Kreuze selber tragen! Erbarm dich
unser, o Jesu !

O innocent Lamb of God, slaughtered on the
trunk of the Cross, patient at all times,
however You were scorned.
You have borne all sins,
otherwise we would have to despair.
Have mercy on us, o Jesus.

After this chorus we begin to meet the characters and to hear the story. The one who holds it all together is the narrator, St. Matthew the Evangelist. In the three hours between the opening chorus and the closing solos and chorus, the tenor will be constantly on his feet, linking together the scores of other vocal solos, dialogues, choruses, and chorales. Bach assigns to other solo voices the parts of Jesus, the disciples, and the other main characters. The chorus reappears often, sometimes as the community of believers, sometimes as the crowd in the story.

Evangelist (narrator)	tenor, usually accompanied only by continuo (harpsichord)
Jesus	bass, accompanied by halo of strings, except in his last utterance
Pilate	bass
Judas	bass

Peter	bass
Wife of Pilate	soprano
Two Witnesses	alto and tenor

soprano, alto, tenor, bass four soloists from the choirs represent the Christian community, singing of their reactions and emotions as the story is played out.

At the end of the opening chorus, the Evangelist narrates the scene between Jesus and his disciples. We hear Jesus, sung by a bass as is usual in Baroque sacred music, predicting his own death. The key changes from G-major for the narrator, to the dark key of B-minor for Jesus. Bass voices sing the parts of some other male characters, but we know this is Jesus because he is accompanied by a soft shimmer in the strings, almost like a halo.

Next we hear a beautiful chorale, an expression of the dismay of the Christian community on hearing this news: "O blessed Jesus, how have you offended?" When the chorus acts as the community of believers, it often sing a chorale (hymn) tune, most of which Bach's congregation would have known from childhood. Bach's audience certainly knew this haunting tune from the previous century.

This is how the story progresses: the tenor narrates the story from St. Matthew's gospel. Other voices represent the other characters quoted in the text. The chorus represents either the mob described in the story, or Christian community reacting in horror to what is happening.

The scene shifts and we hear the high priests conspiring against Jesus, then the scene of the woman anointing Jesus with precious ointments. In response, we hear an alto voice singing a poignant recitative in which we can imagine the woman's tears in the downward figure played by two flutes. The recitative sets up the deeply moving and justly famous aria, "Buss und Reu" (Repentance and Regret), with the weeping flute duet in the background. As with the other scenes of the St. Matthew Passion, this scene ends with the voice of the Christian community, here expressing grief and remorse, in the voice of the alto.

"Buss und Reu," (Repentance and Regret) aria for alto, No. 10

Buß und Reu, Buß und Reu	Repentance and regret, repentance and regret
Knirscht das Sündenherz entzwei.	rips the sinful heart in two.
Das die Tropfen meiner Zähren	Thus the drops of my tears,
Angenehme Spezerei,	desirable spices,
Treuer Jesu, dir gebären.	are brought to You, loving Jesus.

Next we have Jesus at the Passover seder with his disciples. "Verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me." We hear the Evangelist's narration and the disciples's frenzied response, "Herr, bin ich's?" (Lord, is it I?), said eleven times to represent the eleven disciples, excluding Judas.

With the Passover seder concluded, the action shifts to the Mount of Olives. After another scene with the disciples, we hear for the first time the central melody of the story, the passion chorale, a hymn tune from the previous century that Bach will use five times in the St. Matthew, first in a straightforward harmonization, later in different keys and increasingly dissonant harmonies, reflecting the torment being portrayed. Here is the first and simplest version, the one that closes the scene of the Passover seder and the night on the Mount of Olives, expressing the Christian community's complete trust in Jesus.

Next is Jesus's prophesy of Peter's denial, followed by the second appearance of the passion chorale; this time the mood is one notch more somber.

Passion chorale, second version "Ich will hier bei dir stehen," No. 23

Ich will hier bei dir stehen;
 Verachte mich doch nicht!
 Von dir will ich nicht gehen,
 Wenn dir dein Herze bricht.
 Wenn dein Herz wird erblassen
 Im letzten Todesstoß,
 Alsdenn will ich dich fassen
 In meinen Arm und Schoß.

I would stand here beside thee;
 Do not then scorn me!
 From thee I will not depart
 Even if thy heart is breaking.
 When thy heart shall grow pale
 In the last pang of death,
 Then I will grasp thee
 In my arms and lap.

The action now moves to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus appeals to God, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me," then two moving arias, one for tenor, one for bass, agonizing over the fate they see overtaking their Savior. At the beginning of the next scene, Jesus's betrayal and arrest, the disciples have fallen asleep. Jesus is angry with them before turning to contemplate what he is about to face. Now we hear the voice of the Evangelist, agitated and angry as he reports the approach of the Roman soldiers and the betrayal of Judas. In contrast to the angry Evangelist, Jesus is calm as he greets Judas and accepts his fate.

Next we have the amazing storm duet with chorus: as soprano and alto express grief and disbelief at the arrest of Jesus, their duet is punctuated by violent outbursts from the chorus demanding the release of Jesus: "Loose him! Leave him! Bind him not!" Now a storm crashes down from the heavens, with thunder from the double basses, and lightning crackling from the flutes and oboes, as the chorus shouts, "Have lightnings and thunders their fury forgotten?" Suddenly, we have silence, and just as suddenly a fugal explosion in the distant key of F-sharp minor as the chorus wails, "Then open, O fathomless pit, all thy terrors! Destroy them! Overwhelm them, devour them, consume with tumult of rage the treacherous betrayer, the merciless throng!"

"So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen," (Thus my Jesus is now captured), duet for soprano and alto, with chorus, No. 27a

So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen.
 -Laßt ihn, haltet, bindet nicht! -
 Mond und Licht
 Ist vor Schmerzen untergangen,
 Weil mein Jesus ist gefangen.
 Sie führen ihn, er ist gebunden.

Thus my Jesus is now captured.
 - Leave Him, stop, don't bind Him! -
 Moon and light
 for sorrow have set,
 since my Jesus is captured.
 They take Him away, He is bound.

Sind Blitze, sind Donner in Wolken
 verschwunden?
 Eröffne den feurigen Abgrund, o Hölle,
 Zertrümmre, verderbe, verschlinge, zerschelle
 Mit plötzlicher Wut
 Den falschen Verräter, das mörderische Blut! -

Are lightning and thunder
 extinguished in the clouds?
 Open the fiery abyss, o Hell,
 crush, destroy, devour, smash
 with sudden rage
 the false betrayer, the murderous blood! -

Part I ends with another emotional choral outcry.

"O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß," (O mankind, mourn your great sins), chorale no. 29

O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß,
 Darum Christus seines Vaters Schoß
 Äußert und kam auf Erden;
 Von einer Jungfrau rein und zart

Für uns er hie geboren ward,
 Er wolt der Mittler werden,
 Den Toten er das Leben gab
 Und legt dabei all Krankheit ab

Bis sich die Zeit herdrange,
 Daß er für uns geopfert würd,
 Trüg unser Sünden schwere Bürd
 Wohl an dem Kreuze lange.
 O mankind, mourn your great sins,
 for which Christ left his Father's bosom
 and came to earth;
 from a virgin pure and tender

he was born here for us,
 he wished to become our Intercessor,
 he gave life to the dead
 and laid aside all sickness
 until the time approached
 that he would be offered for us,
 bearing the heavy burden of our sins
 indeed for a long time on the Cross.

Before moving on, let us consider what the reaction must have been to this daunting work at its first performance. The St. Matthew was longer, more complex, and called for greater performance forces than any Bach ever composed--and perhaps any work ever composed to that time. The work reached heights of emotion and drama unequaled in any church music to that time. Bach's contract with the city in 1723 had called for no overly operatic music, and the St. Matthew is as operatic as Baroque music ever got outside of the opera house. In a book titled, *The History of Church Music in Saxony*, published in 1732, three years after the first complete performance of the St. Matthew, the author wrote this, probably referring to the St. Matthew Passion:

When in a large town this Passion music was done with twelve strings, many oboes, bassoons, and other instruments, many people were astonished and did not know what to make of it. In the pew of a noble family in church, many ministers and noble ladies were present. When this theatrical music began, all the people were thrown into the greatest bewilderment, looked at each other and said, "What good can come of this?" An old woman of the nobility said, "God save us, my children! It's just as if one were at the opera comedy." Everyone was generally displeased by it and voiced many complaints against it.

Part II begins with an alto solo, "Ach, non ist mein Jesus hin" (Where has my Jesus gone?) expressing the personal grief of one onlooker. Next the Evangelist narrates the story of the false witnesses. One of the witnesses says, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days'" and the other, obviously coached, repeats the story word for word. In a nice touch that shows Bach's great skill in integrating music and text, he sets their accounts as a canon. That is, the second part exactly imitates the first, just as the second witnesses's testimony exactly imitates that of the first. As the deposition ends, we hear a final cadence that sounds too final; this is Bach letting us know that the witness sound too certain, too coached, not spontaneous.

The High Priest responds, "He hath spoken blasphemy," then turns to the chorus of priests and asks, "Now you have heard his blasphemy. What think ye?" And the howling mob answers "He is worthy of death." Bach uses his signature tool, polyphony, to create this violent effect, then follows it up with another fugal mob scene, as the chorus mocks Jesus asking, "Now tell us, Thou Christ, who is he that smote thee?"

"Und der Hohepriester anwortete, und sprach zu ihm" (And the high priest answered, and said to him) and "Da speieten sie aus in sein Angesicht" (Then they spit in his face); Evangelist, Jesus, High Priest, chorus, No. 36

<p>36a. Evangelist <i>Und der Hohenpriester antwortete und sprach zu ihm:</i></p> <p>Hohepriester <i>Ich beschwöre dich bei dem lebendigen Gott, daß du uns sagest, ob du seiest Christus, der Sohn Gottes?</i></p> <p>Evangelist <i>Jesus sprach zu ihm:</i></p> <p>Jesus <i>Du sagests. Doch sage ich euch: von nun an wirds geschehen, daß ihr sehen werdet des Menschen Sohn sitzen zur Rechten der Kraft und kommen in den Wolken des Himmels.</i></p> <p>Evangelist <i>Da zerriß der Hohepriester seine Kleider und sprach:</i></p> <p>Hohepriester <i>Er hat Gott gelästert; was dürfen wir weiter Zeugnis? Siehe, itzt habt ihr seine Gotteslästerung gehöret. Was dünket euch?</i></p> <p>Evangelist <i>Sie antworteten und sprachen:</i></p> <p>36b. Chor I & II <i>Er ist des Todes schuldig!</i></p> <p>36c. Evangelist <i>Da speieten sie aus in sein Angesicht und schlugen ihn mit Fäusten. Etliche aber schlugen ihn ins Angesicht und sprachen:</i></p> <p>36d. Chor I & II <i>Weissage uns, Christe, wer ists, der dich schlug?</i></p>	<p>36a. Evangelist <i>And the high priest answered and said to him:</i></p> <p>High Priest <i>I abjure you by the living God to tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God!</i></p> <p>Evangelist <i>Jesus said to him:</i></p> <p>Jesus <i>You say it. Yet I say to you: from now on it will come to pass that you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and approaching in the clouds of heaven.</i></p> <p>Evangelist <i>Then the high priest tore his garments and said:</i></p> <p>High Priest <i>He has blasphemed God; what further witness do we need? Behold, now you have heard his blasphemy. What do you think?</i></p> <p>Evangelist <i>They answered and said:</i></p> <p>36b. Chorus I & II <i>He is worthy of death!</i></p> <p>36c. Evangelist <i>Then they spit in his face and struck him with fists. Some of them, however, struck him in the face and said:</i></p> <p>36d. Chorus I & II <i>Prophecy to us, Christ, who is it who strikes you?</i></p>
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The scene ends with a quiet chorale from the Christians community, who cannot believe the treatment of Jesus. Next we have Peter's denial of Jesus. As Peter denies that he knows Jesus for the third time, the Evangelist says, "And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the words of Jesus, which said unto him, 'Before the cock crows, thou shalt deny Me thrice.' And he went out and wept bitterly."

Now we hear one voice from the Christian community in response. These are the most personal moments of the Passion, and some of the most moving. As the onlookers watch Christ's suffering, they sing about their own feelings--not about the injustice of it, not about the Christian community, but about their own

feelings right now. Here is one such aria--or really a duet between the alto and the solo violin, weeping with the singer.

“Erbarme Dich,” aria for alto

Erbarme dich,
Mein gott, un meiner Zären willen!
Schau hier,
Herz und Auge weint vor dir
Bitterlich.

Have mercy,
Lord, on me, regard my bitter weeping,
Look at me,
Heart and eyes both weep to Thee
Bitterly.

We have the scene of Judas’s remorse and suicide, then Jesus before Pilate, closing with the third appearance of the passion chorale.

Next we hear the tense scene of Pilate saying that he will release one of the condemned prisoners, and asking the mob to choose between Jesus and Barabbas, a thief. Bach amps up the intensity with a wildly dissonant chord on the crowd’s key line, “Give us Barrabas!” But Bach isn’t done yet. Pilate then asks, “What shall I do then with Jesus?” and the mob responds, “Let him be crucified!” setting off a ferocious turba chorus (referring to a short chorus for a crowd in a Passion setting). In this case Bach depicts the angry crowd in a fast fugal chorus with the sections entering in sharp dissonances one right after the other.

“Auf das Fest aber hatte der Lamdpfleger Gewohnheit,”(At the festival, however, the Governor had a custom), Evangelist, Pilate, Pilate’s wife, chorus, No. 45

45a. Evangelist

Auf das Fest aber hatte der Landpfleger Gewohnheit, dem Volk einen Gefangenen loszugeben, welchen sie wollten. Er hatte aber zu der Zeit einen Gefangenen, einen sonderlichen von andern, der hieß Barrabas. Und da sie versammelt waren, sprach Pilatus zu ihnen:

Pilatus

Welchen wollt ihr, daß ich euch losgebe? Barrabam oder Jesum, von dem gesaget wird, er sei Christus?

Evangelist

Denn er wußte wohl, daß sie ihn aus Neid überantwortet hatten. Und da er auf dem Richtstuhl saß, schickete sein Weib zu ihm und ließ ihm sagen:

Pilati Weib

Habe du nichts zu schaffen mit diesem Gerechten; ich habe heute viel erlitten im Traum von seinetwegen!

Evangelist

Aber die Hohenpriester und die Ältesten überredeten das Volk, daß sie um Barrabam bitten sollten und Jesum umbrächten. Da antwortete nun der Landpfleger und sprach zu ihnen:

Pilatus

Welchen wollt ihr unter diesen Zweien, den ich euch soll losgeben?

Evangelist

Sie sprachen:

Chor I & II

Barrabam!

Evangelist

Pilatus sprach zu ihnen:

Pilatus

Was soll ich denn machen mit Jesu, von dem gesagt wird, er sei Christus?

Evangelist

Sie sprachen alle:

45b. Chor I & II

Laß ihn kreuzigen!

45a. Evangelist

At the festival, however, the Governor had a custom of releasing a prisoner to the people, whichever they wanted. He had, however, at the time a most unusual prisoner named Barabbas. And as they were gathered together, Pilate said to them:

Pilate

Which one do you want me to release to you? Barabbas or Jesus, of whom it is said, he is the Christ?

Evangelist

For he knew well that they had handed him over out of envy. And while he sat upon the judgment seat, his wife sent to him and her message said:

Pilate's Wife

Have nothing to do with this righteous man; I have suffered much in a dream today on his account!

Evangelist

But the high priests and the elders convinced the people that they should ask for Barabbas and convict Jesus. So when the Governor answered and said to them:

Pilate

Which one between the two do you want me to release to you?

Evangelist

They said:

Chorus I & II

Barabbas!

Evangelist

Pilate said to them:

Pilate

What shall I do then with Jesus, of whom it is said, he is the Christ?

Evangelist

They all said:

45b. Chorus I & II

Let him be crucified!

But now in a remarkable dramatic contrast, the chorus is suddenly transformed from a bloodthirsty mob back to the humble Christian community. The tune is the same one we heard in the first chorale back in Part I, “Herzliebster Jesu,” and later in the chorale No. 31.

“Wie wunderbarlich ist doch diese Strafe,” (How strange is this punishment), chorus No. 46

Wie wunderbarlich ist doch diese Strafe!
Die gute Hirte leidet für die Schafe,
Die Schuld bezahlt der Herre, der Gerechte,
Für seine Knechte.

How strange is this punishment!
The Good Shepherd suffers for the sheep.
The Lord, the righteous One, atones for the crime
on His servant's behalf.

The drama continues to build. Pilate sees the injustice of the situation, and is reluctant to go through with his part in it. “But what evil has [this man] done?” he asks the crowd. But they will not be appeased, shouting again, “Let him be crucified.” Here is another rapid angry turba chorus, but now higher in pitch and emotional intensity than before. And as before, the harmony does not resolve in the final chord. We’re left hanging, waiting for the resolution, maintaining the tension and drama in the music.

Now Pilate tries to remove himself from the strife, and the injustice that is playing out before him, washing his hands and declaring, “I am innocent of the blood of this just man.” Again the crowd descends with another violent turba chorus, this time ending with a clear cadence in D major, letting us know that Jesus’s fate is now sealed.

“Sie schrieen aber noch mehr, und sprachen,” (They screamed even more, and said), No. 50

Evangelist
Sie schrieen aber noch mehr und sprachen:
Chor I & II
Laß ihn kreuzigen!
Evangelist
Da aber Pilatus sahe, daß er nichts schaffete,
sondern daß ein viel größer Getümmel ward,
nahm er Wasser und wusch die Hände
vor dem Volk und sprach:
Pilatus
Ich bin unschuldig an dem Blut dieses
Gerechten, sehet ihr zu!
Evangelist
Da antwortete das ganze Volk und sprach:
Chor I & II
Sein Blut komme über uns und unsre Kinder.
Evangelist
Da gab er ihnen Barrabam los; aber Jesum I
ieß er geißeln und überantwortete ihn,
daß er gekreuziget würde.

Evangelist
They screamed even more and said:
Chorus I & II
Let Him be crucified!
Evangelist
When Pilate saw, however, that he achieved
nothing, rather that a much greater riot occurred,
he took water and washed his
hands before the people and said:
Pilate
I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man,
see to it yourselves!
Evangelist
Then all the people answered and said:
Chorus I & II
Let His blood be on us and on our children.
Evangelist
Then he released Barabbas to them; but Jesus
he had scourged and handed Him over to be
crucified.

The scene ends with the alto describing the scourging of Jesus. Then in the aria we hear her grief at watching the suffering of Jesus, and at the same time her recognition of the meaning of his sacrifice. The action shifts to the mock coronation of Jesus, including another turba chorus for the angry crowd as they call out, “Hail, King of the Jews!” Immediately there follows the fourth appearance of the passion chorale, as the Christian community tries to take in what is happening.

Now Jesus is crucified, accompanied by catcalls from the mob. The two choruses represent two different parts of the mob, first singing separately, then joining together to accuse Jesus of blasphemy.

In Jesus's final moment, he calls out in despair, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" Bach sets the music in the dark and remote key of E-flat minor, hardly used before this moment. Only now, at the darkest hour, does Jesus lose the halo of strings that has accompanied words on every previous occasion. This is another great dramatic stroke from Bach, in a recitative with the emotional power of any aria.

As the Evangelist tells us of Jesus's death, we hear for the last time the great passion chorale. The conductor Nicholas Harnoncourt writes of this moment, "Into this last chorale Bach pours the full depth of his most personal and profoundly stirred emotions at the death of Christ. Never before had a chorale text been interpreted in music with harmonies so charged with emotion."

"Wenn Ich Einmal Soll Scheiden" (When I must depart one day) passion chorale, fifth version, No. 62

As the story draws to its inexorable conclusion, we have the final aria, in which the action stops and the singer reflects on what he has seen. Here is the character of Joseph of Arimathea, a stonemason who by tradition helped take Jesus' body down from the cross, and then bury him. This sad mood of the scene is relieved by subtext of the poem, in which Joseph is saying both that he will bury Jesus, and that he will enclose Jesus's spirit in his own heart. The poetic notion contrasts Jesus's death and burial with his eternal home in the soul of mankind. Bach perfectly mirrors this mixture of sadness and devotion by giving us a theme tinged with sadness, yet in a lilting rhythm that points to a revival of life. It is one of the great moments of the story.

"Mache dich mein Herze rein," (Make yourself pure, my heart), aria for bass, No. 75, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Karl Richter/Münchener Bach-Chor, Orchester

Mache dich, mein Herze, rein,
Ich will Jesum selbst begraben.
Denn er soll nun mehr in mir
Für und für
Seine süsse Ruhe haben.
Welt, geh aus, lass Jesum ein!

Make yourself pure, my heart,
I want to bury Jesus myself.
For from now on He shall have in me,
forever and ever,
His sweet rest.
World, get out, let Jesus in!

As the Great Passion moves to its close, each soloist reflects on the meaning of the story we have just heard: starting with the bass, then the tenor, alto, and finally soprano. After each solo statement, the chorus sings, "Mein Jesu, gute Nacht" (My Jesus, good Night, or fare thee well).

"Nun ist der Herr zur Ruh gebracht" (Now the Lord is brought to rest) soloists and chorus, No. 77

Nun ist der Herr zur Ruh gebracht.
-Mein Jesu, gute Nacht! -
Die Müh ist aus, die unsre Sünden ihm gemacht.

- My Jesus, good night! -
The weariness is over, that our sins have given
Him.

-Mein Jesu, gute Nacht! -
O selige Gebeine,
Seht, wie ich euch mit Buß und Reu beweine,
Daß euch mein Fall in solche Not gebracht!

- My Jesus, good night! -
O blessed bones,
see, how I weep over You with repentance and
regret, since my fall has brought such anguish
upon You!

-Mein Jesu, gute Nacht! -
Habt lebenslang vor euer Leiden tausend Dank,
Daß ihr mein Seelenheil so wert geacht!

- My Jesus, good night! -
Lifelong, thousand thanks to You for Your
suffering, since You held my soul's salvation so
dear. - My Jesus, good night! -

-Mein Jesu, gute Nacht! -
Now the Lord is brought to rest.

At the end, we have another powerful statement from the whole Christian community, to a funereal rhythm that brings us back to the great chorus that opened the work. We will hear the last part of this chorus

“Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder” (We sit down with tears) final chorus, No. 78

Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder
Und rufen dir im Grabe zu:
Ruhe sanfte, sanfte ruh!
Ruht, ihr ausgesognen Glieder!
- Ruhet sanfte, ruhet wohl. -

We sit down with tears
and call to You in the grave:
rest gently, gently rest!
Rest, you exhausted limbs!
- Rest gently, rest well. -

Euer Grab und Leichenstein
Soll den ängstlichen Gewissen
Ein bequemes Ruhekissen
Und der Seelen Ruhstatt sein.
- Ruhet sanfte, sanfte ruht! -
Höchst vergnügt
Schlummern da die Augen ein.

Your grave and headstone
shall, for the anxious conscience,
be a comfortable pillow
and the resting place for the soul.
- rest gently, gently rest! -
Highly contented,
there the eyes fall asleep.

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*,
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*,

“Altos in Bach’s Vocal Works” discussion at <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Topics/Altos.htm>

Appendix 1: St. Matthew—The Dutch Passion

<http://allofbach.com/en/bwv/bwv-244/>

Practically everyone in the Netherlands knows the *St Matthew Passion*. Every year, there is a real ‘Matthew madness’ in the month before Easter. **Each town has its own performance** and any reasonably large concert hall has at least two or three.

The *St Matthew Passion* tells the story of the last days of Jesus. He is betrayed, tried, crucified and buried. The lyrics were compiled by Picander (the pseudonym of Christian Friedrich Henrici), probably in close consultation with Bach himself. For their theme, they took the story as told by St Matthew the Evangelist. As different groups or people have their say, the singers get different roles – Christ, Judas, Peter, a slave girl, the pupils, the high priests, the people and the soldiers, etc.

At key moments in the story, Bach and Picander added chorales and arias as a reflection of the biblical story. The action is suspended and the events are placed in the theological context of Bach’s day. The chorale lyrics and melodies come from the Lutheran hymn book, and were well known to the congregation in Leipzig. Even though Bach’s harmonies were new, everyone would have recognised the melody and the words. The lyrics for the opening and closing choruses and the arias were brand new, however. Both the arias and the chorales often link up seamlessly with the evangelical words.

In his lyrics, Picander distinguishes between two groups of people: the ‘Daughters of Zion’ (Jerusalem) on the one hand, and the faithful souls on the other. Picander often puts these two groups in dialogue with one another. Bach reinforces this dialogue effect by having two separate ensembles of singers and instrumentalists, which he refers to as coro I and coro II. Each of the two ensembles has its own function.

The first choir is part of the story and provides the most important emotional reactions, as in the arias 'Erbarme dich' and 'Aus Liebe'. The second choir asks questions, provides commentary and draws conclusions.

In the chorales, Bach combines the two ensembles, and the whole group supports the spoken word. He also uses both choirs together where he wants to portray the furious crowd to maximum effect, as in 'Lass ihn kreuzigen'. The first choir always takes the lead, and the second follows.

The 'Dutch' passion

Whether or not they are lovers of classical music, practically everyone in the Netherlands knows the *St Matthew Passion*. Every year, there is a real 'Matthew madness' in the month before Easter. Each town has its own performance and any reasonably large concert hall has at least two or three. The first performance of the *St Matthew Passion* in the Netherlands was in Rotterdam in 1870. Amsterdam followed suit in 1874. With the Concertgebouw orchestra, Willem Mengelberg then instituted a Passion tradition in Amsterdam that still continues today. In reaction to the Mengelberg performances, the Netherlands Bach Society was formed in 1921. The founders thought that the *St Matthew* should be performed where it belonged – in a church. The annual performance by the Bach Society in Naarden grew to become 'the' Dutch *St Matthew Passion*.

Appendix 2: Who was the greatest composer by Tim Smith

Tim Smith, "The Greatest Composer?"

<http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/meer.html#GreatestComposer>

The Greatest Composer?

The student of music need not read far before encountering the passionate assertion that Johann Sebastian Bach was probably the greatest composer who ever lived. Such ardent declarations might well be excused as author's bias were they not so prevalent in the literature--not to mention, proposed with such fervor--at least to elevate the proposition to a reasoned debate. If Johann Sebastian was not the greatest, he was at least in the company of that august group; but the rule of greatness of an artist's life and work is ultimately measured by the eye in which the beholder's own work has been influenced by the life in question.

Influencing Others...

We might begin debate, then, with the matter of Bach's influence upon composers and composition. For if we were to measure his greatness upon the basis of the number of his compositions, the man would surely be found wanting. His more prolific contemporaries, [Telemann](#) and [Vivaldi](#), collectively wrote at least five times as much; although the latter is sometimes glibly criticized as having written not more than 450 different [concerti](#), but the same concerto for 450 different combinations. When it comes to influence, however, we are on solid ground; no single composer has wielded such a weighty sword as has Johann Sebastian. Even those who might deny this, that they have never striven to emulate Bach's technique, might find it more difficult to deny that they have at least striven not to emulate his technique. Thus, positively or negatively, Johann Sebastian has cut a wide swath.

In his old age [Haydn](#) went to great trouble to obtain a manuscript copy of the [Mass in B Minor](#) (see [YouTube](#) instructions). At nearly the same time young [Mozart](#), visiting the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, upon hearing a Bach [motet](#) for the first time, exclaimed "Now there is music from which a man can learn something." Whereafter, it is recorded, Bach's grand-successor ushered the young composer into the library where Mozart quickly spread out reams of Bach in earnest study. No wonder Beethoven exclaimed "Not Bach, but [Meer](#) should be his name!" [Mendelssohn](#) revived Bach and [Brahms](#) eagerly awaited each new edition of [Schumann's Bach Gesellschaft](#).

...and Being Influenced

But the ocean of Bach could not have streamed over so many if he had not first allowed himself to be illumined by lesser lights than himself (when one's is the brightest, any other's must necessarily be dim). So, Bach acquired a voracious appetite for the music of his contemporaries: [Pachelbel](#), [Keiser](#), [Frescobaldi](#), [Froberger](#), [Telemann](#), [Fischer](#), [Strungk](#), [Corelli](#), [Buxtehude](#), [Bruhns](#), and [Böhm](#). If he is reckoned to have been a great composer, it is partly because he did not appear [ex nihilo](#). In 1802 [Forkel](#), wrote: "Bach knew [Couperin's](#) works and valued them as he valued the works of several French harpsichord composers of the period, because one can learn from them a neat and graceful keyboard technique." Bach's work was born of the matrix of musical styles that were as much the creations of his contemporaries as of himself. We do well to remember that in Bach's day greatness was measured by how well one mastered technique, not originality. Johann Sebastian Bach's music has infinite connections to the people, traditions, and institutions of his day; he was not wanting to escape from the present or the past.

Humility & Hard Work...

It requires more than token humility for one who is good to become better through the self-criticism that attends the study of other artists' works; this was clearly Bach's attitude. "I have worked hard" he said, "anyone who works just as hard will go just as far." Johann Sebastian began this work in 1704 by walking a circuit of more than five hundred miles to hear [Buxtehude's Abendmusik](#). Bach concluding many days by candlelight laboriously hand-copying the creations of others (he is known to have made copies or adaptations of works by [Locatelli](#), [Marcello](#), [Palestrina](#), [Pergolesi](#), [Kerll](#), [Caldara](#), [Handel](#), and [Reincken](#)). But Bach did not merely clone the muse of his mentors, he continuously reworked it so that their expressions might become truly his own, transformed by a synthesis of ideas simmered by his own muse.

...or Genius?

The greatness of Bach's reputation has less to do, then, with genius--his innate talent--than with the self-discipline that nurtured that talent to its full potential. [Saint-Saëns](#) may have had the most natural ability of any composer since Mozart, but his work does not equal Mozart's, because he did not work as hard. [Handel](#), who knew [Telemann](#) well, wrote that his friend could compose a [motet](#) in eight parts as easily as you or I might write a letter. Perhaps, because Telemann's motets by the dozen came with such little thought on his part, today they are seldom given any thought, while Bach's half-dozen are thought to be the greatest in the choral repertory.

Copying to Learn

But being influenced by, and influencing, others, presupposes a more substantive greatness than mere emulation might suggest. Twentieth-century pop culture, like a continuously mutating virus, replicates itself with minor variations upon each new generation, achieving commercial acclaim by copying the latest Oscar, Emmy, or Grammy. Copying, without respect for the artwork or the artist, and copying in order to learn technique are different matters indeed; one is [kitsch](#), the other, an education. People are neither educated nor influenced by that which has no power to change or to inform them; and people are not changed by that which they do not respect, even if it is a copy of something they do respect.

Coming Back to Bach

If Bach has earned the respect of each new generation it is primarily because we hear in his music something of himself, something that sustained him, something that he offers to us that we need, something that will make each generation better. Whatever it may be, something causes us to return to Bach, often, for our own sustenance. It is plain to most people that the perpetuation of musical works of art depends ultimately upon the willingness of musicians and audiences to play and to listen to them. Bach's music, unlike Leonardo's Mona Lisa or Michelangelo's Pietá, exists only when it is heard, and when it ceases to be heard it ceases, dusty scores notwithstanding, to exist.

Time Does Tell

That people listen to Bach is not evidence in and of itself that his music is great, else, regrettably, would be also every ditty from today's top fifty chart. But if an audience alone is not the measure of greatness in a composer, an audience betraying no hint of infidelity, two-hundred and fifty years after the fact, is a measure, to be sure. It is a cliché, but true nonetheless, time does tell. Unlike so many composers, some flashes in the pan during their own lifetimes, others great, no doubt, but whose audiences have consistently dwindled through the years, Bach's audience, which at his death consisted of a few [sons](#) and faithful students, has only grown. Johann Sebastian Bach's reputation is unique in that sense; he may be the only composer in western history to have died for all intents and purposes without a reputation but to have been resurrected with such devotion one hundred years later by a generation whose musical tastes and practices he could never have anticipated.

Making a Reputation

Passing the test of time is qualification enough for Bach to claim a wreath (not necessarily the biggest wreath) of greatness. But when we reflect upon the reasons why time has not ravaged his reputation we can at least appreciate Johann Sebastian's stature as first among equals. There are reasons and then there are reasons, but, in Bach's case, there are six compelling reasons why he just may have been the greatest composer who ever lived.

1. Inventor or Inventive?

First, while Johann Sebastian Bach restricted himself to the structure of known genres and stylistic idioms (with the exception of the [viola pomposa](#) and his two- and three-part inventions, Bach did not invent anything) his music is yet unparalleled for its inventiveness. With the possible exception of the newly-discovered [chorale preludes](#) of his youth, virtually everything that he wrote is characterized by an highly individualistic stamp that makes it easily recognizable as "Bach". While he made use of the referential idioms of his day, his music is always fresh, highly creative, never clichéd and never hackneyed.

2. Nice Tunes

Second, Bach had a natural gift for writing beautiful melodies. It is sometimes said that Bach's music makes too many demands upon the listener, therefore it is accessible only to the [dilettante](#). If it is true that Bach requires an initiation, he certainly does not require a college degree. What amateur has not been moved by such masterpieces of melody as "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," "Air on the G String," and "Sheep May Safely Graze"? Whatever be one's musical taste, there is a passionate expression that will reach out and grab any person within earshot of a good Bach tune.

3. Smart Stuff

Third, while Bach's music is accessible by the beginner it belongs to that class of the most rigorous music conceived by the human mind. There is an intellectual component to Bach, a logic, that fascinates musicians and non-musicians alike, but especially theorists and composers. For this reason Bach's [chorale](#) harmonizations have comprised the core material for the study of [voice leading](#) for a century. Bach-style [counterpoint](#), while not entirely understood, has nevertheless served as a model for composers from the nineteenth century's Beethoven and [Brahms](#) to our own Webern, Schoenberg, Berg, and Boulez.

4. Organic Too

Fourth, Bach's music, representing as it does the [apotheosis](#) of baroque style, manifests an integration of structural elements, an organicism, that the Germans call [Fortspinnung](#)--the "spinning out" of a single [motive](#), usually stated within the first few seconds of a movement. Bach's music is organic in the sense that the whole is always related to its parts and would be dysfunctional were any of its parts to be omitted. Similarly, the parts of Bach's music are inextricably intertwined with each other and with the whole, so that no single part is entirely intelligible without the perception of that whole. Not to trivialize non-organicist systems used by other cultures and composers (there are other ways to organize sounds), Bach's music has withstood the test of time because it is compellingly and lucidly structured. In terms of its form, [counterpoint](#) of [harmony](#) and [melody](#), balance, completeness, and [temporal](#) elements, Bach's music represents the crowning achievement of [architectonic](#) principles and processes practiced

by the western world for half a millennium.

5. You Have a Point

Fifth, if Bach accomplished no greater thing, it is enough to recommend him to future generations that he raised the art of [counterpoint](#) to a level never seen. When, late in their careers, [Mozart](#) and [Beethoven](#) both perceived a need for the infusion of new techniques and forms into their own compositional toolboxes, they embarked upon a systematic study of the most highly advanced contrapuntal procedure known to humankind: Bach [fugues](#). From that study forward the music of both composers was decidedly contrapuntal. Not only so, but, in an ironic twist of association, because Bach, the consummate contrapuntist, was primarily remembered by them as [Kapellmeister](#) (church musician), fugue as a procedure came to be nearly synonymous with sacred as a style. Throughout the next century few composers would write a major sacred work--[Mass](#) or [oratorio](#)--without consecrating it in a liberal baptism of fugues.

6. Devout Lutheran

Finally, it is by no means the least of Bach's claims to greatness that he devoted his talents primarily to the service of the church. Of his nearly 1000 compositions, roughly three-fourths were written expressly for use in the Lutheran [liturgy](#); this repertory has withstood the test of time because it has profound spiritual substance. While it may antagonize modern criticism to invoke the intentions of the artist to explain his art, Bach himself would surely have resisted any attempt to magnify his memory without giving credit where he felt credit was due. [Soli Deo Gloria](#) was his belief not a [bromide](#).

Gone to Leipzig

In 1723 Bach and his wife, Anna Magdalena, were comfortably employed by the ducal court of [Anhalt-Cöthen](#) with a combined income significantly higher than he would make in [Leipzig](#). With every evidence that they were welcome to remain at Cöthen indefinitely, they took the cut in salary to return to the service of the church. At his Leipzig [nadir](#) Bach confided to a friend that he had decades earlier taken the abortive church position at [Mühlhausen](#) because his objective had been to compose "a well-appointed body of church music." It appears, on the face of it, that Bach left Cöthen for Leipzig because that goal continued to beckon.

Why Not Opera?

But why church music, why not [opera](#)? His compatriots, [Telemann](#) and [Handel](#)--both famous, both rich--wrote eighty operas between them, but Bach wrote not a one. It is a nagging question why Bach, born a month after Handel (and fifty miles away) did not follow the same career path for which he was amply endowed and surely would have succeeded. After all is said and done one cannot escape the conclusion that, though Johann Sebastian certainly cared about his career, careerism was not what moved him. Music moved him, especially when it was offered in thanksgiving to God--which Bach would have granted to any music that was well crafted. Bach's pupils were fond of recalling that their teacher often quoted Gerhardt Niedt: "The sole purpose of harmony is the Glory of God; all other use is but idle jingling of Satan."

Eternal Harmony

In 1827, one hundred years after the first performance of the St. Matthew Passion, [Mendelssohn](#) resurrected that masterpiece stimulating a revival of interest in Bach's music that has continued unabated through the founding of the [Bach Gesellschaft](#) to this day. When Goethe heard Mendelssohn's performance he wrote to [Zelter](#): "The eternal harmony in Bach's work was in a dialog with himself." Goethe went on to express the idea that before the world was created God must have felt something of "elemental significance." That feeling, wrote Goethe, is expressed in the works of Bach. If Goethe had been a preacher he could not have said it with more zeal -- and Bach's congregation could not have raised a more thunderous "Amen!"

Appendix 3: Bach's Holy Dread
by Alex Ross, published in the New Yorker, Jan. 2, 2017

“O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” The words of the Psalm look bright on the page, but the music pulls them into shadow. The key is G minor. The bass instruments drone on the tonic while the violins weave sixteenth notes around the other notes of the triad. On the third beat of the first bar comes a twinge of harmonic pain—one oboe sounding an E-flat against another oboe’s held D. Oboes are piercing by nature; to place them a half step apart triggers an aggressive acoustic roughness, as when car horns lean on adjacent pitches. In the next several bars, more dissonances accumulate, sustaining tension: F-sharp against G, A-flat against G, E-flat against D, B-flat against A-natural. The ensemble wanders away from the home key and then back, whereupon the cycle begins again, now with a chorus singing “Herr, unser Herrscher” (“Lord, our ruler”) in chords that contract inward:

Herr!

Herr!

Herr!

unser

Herr-r-r . . .

When the upper voices reach “*Herrscher*,” they dissolve into the swirl of the violins, the first syllable elongated into a thirty-three-note melisma. You need not have seen the words *Passio secundum Johannem* at the head of the score to feel that this is the scene at Golgotha: an emaciated body raised on the Cross, nails being driven in one by one, blood trickling down, a murmuring crowd below. It goes on for nine or ten minutes, in an irresistible sombre rhythm, a dance of death that all must join.

What went through the minds of the congregation at the Nikolaikirche, in Leipzig, on Good Friday, 1724, when the St. John Passion had its first performance? A year earlier, Johann Sebastian Bach, aged thirty-nine, had taken up posts as the cantor of the St. Thomas School and the director of music for Leipzig’s Lutheran churches. He had already acquired a reputation for being difficult, for using “curious variations” and “strange tones.” More than a few of his works begin with gestures that inspire awe and fear. Several pieces from his years as an organ virtuoso practice a kind of sonic terrorism. The Fantasia and Fugue in G Minor feasts on dissonance with almost diabolical glee, perpetrating one of the most violent harmonies of the pre-Wagnerian era: a chord in which a D clashes with both a C-sharp and an E-flat, resulting in a full-throated acoustical scream. In the St. John Passion, Bach’s art of holy dread assumes unprecedented dimensions. The almost outlandish thing about “Herr, unser Herrscher” is that it does not simply take the point of view of the mourners and the mockers. It also adopts the perspective of the man on the Cross, gazing up and down. Aspects of the music that seem catastrophic acquire a triumphant tinge. The rhythm conveys mysterious vitality: the second time the “*Herr!*” chords sound, they fall on the second and fourth beats of the bar, in a kind of cosmic syncopation. A single note is lobbed from one section of the ensemble to another, giving a sense of ever-widening space. The sixteenth notes in the violins unspool almost continuously, suggesting the transmission of the Lord’s name through all lands. In the second section of the chorus, where words from Psalm 8 give way to a meditation on the Crucifixion, the dissonances dwindle, and the music moves through a series of expectant dominant-seventh chords, describing a methodical ascent:

Show us, through Your Passion,
 That You, the true Son of God,
 Through all time,
 Even in the greatest humiliation [*Niedrigkeit*],
 Have become glorified [*verherrlicht*]!

The words *Niedrigkeit* and *verherrlicht* land side by side. With the second, Bach writes “forte” in the score, and stamping, defiant D minor takes over. The contradiction of the opening is overcome: light and dark are one.

The conductor John Eliot Gardiner has called “Herr, unser Herrscher” a “portrayal of Christ in majesty like some colossal Byzantine mosaic . . . looking down on the maelstrom of distressed unregenerate humanity.” Others have seen it as a picture of the Trinity, with the pedal point of the Father, the suffering discord of the Son, and the shimmering motion of the Holy Spirit. Whatever images come to mind, the craft that went into the making of the scene—the melodic inspiration, the contrapuntal rigor, the immaculate demonstration of the rules, the insolent breaking of them—is as astounding now as it must have been on that day in 1724. Or so we like to think. One notable fact about the St. John Passion—and about its successor, the St. Matthew—is that we have no eyewitness account of the première. If the good people of Leipzig understood that they were in the presence of the most stupendous talent in musical history, they gave no sign. Indeed, Bach removed “Herr, unser Herrscher” from the score when he revived the St. John the following year—a hint that his listeners may have gone away unhappy.

“Bach & God” (Oxford) is the splendid title of a new book by Michael Marissen, a professor emeritus at Swarthmore College. It brings to mind two approximately equal figures engaged in a complicated dialogue, like Jefferson and Adams, or Siskel and Ebert. The book is one of a number of recent attempts to grapple with Bach’s religiosity. Others are Gardiner’s “Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven” (Knopf); Eric Chafe’s “J. S. Bach’s Johannine Theology” (Oxford); and John Butt’s “Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions” (Cambridge). All ask, in different ways, how we should approach works whose devotional intensity is alien to most modern listeners. Marissen identifies himself as an agnostic, but adds that in the vicinity of Bach’s music he will never be a “*comfortable* agnostic.”

Previous Bach scholarship tended to take a more secular tack. Many of us grew up with an Enlightenment Bach, a nondenominational divinity of mathematical radiance. Glenn Gould’s commentary on the “Goldberg Variations” spoke of a “fundamental coordinating intelligence.” One German scholar went so far as to question the sincerity of Bach’s religious convictions. But the historically informed performance movement, in trying to replicate the conditions in which Bach’s works were first played, helped to restore awareness of his firm theological grounding. Recorded surveys of the two hundred or so sacred cantatas, including Gardiner’s epic undertaking in 1999 and 2000, have brought Bach’s spirituality to the forefront. To what extent does he faithfully transmit Lutheran doctrine? What did he privately believe? Marissen also confronts an issue that many prefer to avoid: do Bach’s Passions project anti-Semitism?

Such questions run up against the central agony of writing about Bach: the paucity of biographical information. Gardiner writes, “We seem to know less about his private life than about that of any other major composer of the last 400 years.” Bach left few substantial traces of his inner life. Mostly, we have a stack of notoriously dull, grouchy business correspondence. The composer-comedian Peter Schickele, better known as P. D. Q. Bach, captured the conundrum in his “Bach Portrait,” of 1989, which juxtaposes bombastic orchestral utterances in the mode of Copland’s “Lincoln Portrait” with recitations from “The Bach Reader”: “My present post amounts to about seven hundred thaler, and when there are rather more funerals than usual, the fees rise in proportion.”

Gardiner’s book, a vividly written volume that appeared in 2013, tries to fill in some of the gaps. We see Bach emerging from a society still traumatized by the Thirty Years’ War and by outbreaks of plague. Life expectancy was around thirty. In the Thuringian town of Eisenach, where Bach was born, quasi-pagan notions of devilry still prevailed. Bach’s education would have been doctrinaire and reactionary. “History is nothing but the demonstration of Christian truth,” one popular textbook said. Gardiner highlights German research that notes rampant ruffianism among Eisenach’s youth and a troubling trend of “brutalization of the boys.” Gardiner may go too far in characterizing Bach as a “reformed teenage thug,” but the young composer is known to have drawn a dagger in the midst of an altercation with a bassoonist.

Thuggish or not, Bach immersed himself in music at an early age, as had generations of Bachs before him. An obituary prepared by Bach’s son Carl Philipp Emanuel speaks of his father’s “unheard-of zeal in studying.” That claim is buttressed by a discovery made a decade ago, of the teen-aged Bach’s precociously precise copies of organ pieces by Reincken and Buxtehude. His life was destined to unfold in a constricted area. The towns and cities where he spent his career—Arnstadt, Mühlhausen, Weimar, Cöthen, and Leipzig—can be seen in a few hours’ driving around central and eastern Germany. But his lifelong habit of studying and copying scores allowed him to roam the Europe of the mind. In his later years, he copied everything from a Renaissance mass by Palestrina to the up-to-date Italianate lyricism of Pergolesi. Bach became an absolute master of his art by never ceasing to be a student of it.

His most exalted sacred works—the two extant Passions, from the seventeen-twenties, and the Mass in B Minor, completed not long before his death, in 1750—are feats of synthesis, mobilizing secular devices to spiritual ends. They are rooted in archaic chants, hymns, and chorales. They honor, with consummate skill, the scholastic discipline of canon and fugue. They make expert use of the word-painting techniques of the Renaissance madrigal and Baroque opera. They absorb such stock scenes as the lament, the pastoral, the lullaby, the rage aria, the tempest. They allude to courtly French dances, Italian love songs, the polonaise. Their furious development of brief motifs anticipates Beethoven, who worshipped Bach when he was young. And their most daring harmonic adventures—for example, the otherworldly modulations in the “Confiteor” of the B-Minor Mass—look ahead to Wagner, even to Schoenberg.

They are works of deep devotion but also of high ambition. Before Bach went to Leipzig, in 1723, he had been contentedly ensconced in Cöthen, some forty miles to the northwest, where a music-loving prince elicited such instrumental tours de force as the first book of the “Well-

Tempered Clavier,” the English Suites, and the music for solo violin and solo cello. But the prince was a Calvinist, and had little need of sacred music. Bach evidently saw the Leipzig job as an opportunity to shape the spiritual life of a city. For the first few years, he pursued that project with ferocious energy, composing cantatas on a weekly basis. Gardiner plausibly evokes Bach in his studio, copyists around him, cranking out music at a frenzied pace—a picture “not dissimilar to the backstage activities on a TV or film set.”

For the most part, Leipzig failed to appreciate the effort. Bach was reprimanded for neglecting his teaching duties and for inserting himself into musical and liturgical matters around the city. A member of the town council called him “incorrigible.” The extensive revisions that he made to the St. John Passion in 1725—“Herr, unser Herrscher” was not the only striking section of the score to be cut—were possibly the result of outside interference. The judgment of another composer in 1737 may sum up the conventional wisdom in Leipzig: “This great man would be the admiration of whole nations if he had more agreeableness, if he did not take away the natural element in his pieces by giving them a turgid and confused style, and if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art.” Bach, for his part, complained in a letter that his experience had been one of “almost continual vexation, envy, and persecution.” Attempts to find a position elsewhere fell short, however, and he remained in Leipzig until his death.

He became a distinguished figure in his final years, his influence felt in many corners of German music, not least because of the activity of his various composing sons. He received the title of Court Composer from the Elector of Saxony and, on a visit to Berlin, astonished Frederick the Great with his improvisations. Still, he had nothing like the celebrity of his contemporary Handel. According to Carl Philipp Emanuel, Bach twice tried to arrange a meeting with Handel, but the latter contrived to make himself unavailable. The implication is that Handel felt threatened. The anecdote gives a poignant glimpse of Bach’s personality: he yearned to join the international élite, but the trappings of success were denied him. He made careful copies of the Passions in his last years, which suggests a hope for posthumous vindication, but he could hardly have imagined the repertory culture that came into existence in the nineteenth century. More likely, he simply wanted to prevent his music from vanishing. Some of it did: at least one other Passion, after St. Mark, was lost.

The book that perhaps reveals more of Bach than any other can be found at the Concordia Seminary, in St. Louis. By chance, that organization came into possession of Bach’s copy of Abraham Calov’s three-volume edition of the Bible, which contains Luther’s translation of the Bible alongside commentaries by Luther and Calov. Bach made notes in it and, in 1733, signed his name on the title page of each volume. The marginalia establish the fervor of his belief: no Sunday Christian could have made such acute observations. Bach singles out passages describing music as a vessel of divinity: in one note, he observes that music was “especially ordered by God’s spirit through David,” and in another he writes, “With devotional music, God is always present in his grace.” The annotations also seem to reveal some soul-searching. This passage is marked as important, and is partly underlined: “As far as your person is concerned, you must not get angry with anyone regardless of the injury he may have done to you. But, where your office requires it, there you must get angry.” One can picture Bach struggling to determine whether his “almost continual vexation” stemmed from his person or his office—from vanity or duty.

Yes, Bach believed in God. What is harder to pin down is how he positioned himself among the theological trends of the time. The Pietist movement, which arose in the late seventeenth century, aimed at reinvigorating an orthodox Lutheran establishment that, in its view, had become too rigid. Pietists urged a renewal of personal devotion and a less combative attitude toward rival religious systems, including Judaism. Bach made passing contact with Pietist figures and themes, though he remained aligned with the orthodox wing—not least because Pietists held that music had too prominent a role in church services.

Bach's two surviving Passions point to an older doctrinal split. John is the visionary among the Evangelists, his philosophical grandeur evident from the first verse ("In the beginning was the Word"). As Chafe observes, the St. John Passion stresses Jesus' messianic nature and accentuates oppositions between good and evil. Theologians relate John to the "Christus Victor" conception of Atonement, which dates back to Christianity's early days, and according to which Christ died on the Cross knowing that his Resurrection would redeem mankind. In Matthew, Jesus has less foreknowledge: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Matthew accords with the other major conception of Atonement, known as the "satisfaction theory," in which humanity is redeemed through the sacrifice of an utterly blameless person. The opening chorus of the St. Matthew Passion, "Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen" ("Come, you daughters, help me mourn"), is an engulfing river of lament, lacking the triumphalism of "Herr, unser Herrscher." The St. Matthew is the more openhearted, empathetic work; the St. John remains a little frightening.

Chafe's interpretation of the St. John detects theology in almost every bar. He notes that over the two parts of the Passion—the first centered on Peter's denial of Jesus, the second on Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate—Bach shifts from flat key signatures to sharp ones and back again. The very look of the notation on the page might be symbolic: sharp signs resemble crosses (# or x). At each transition, Jesus' seeming defeat becomes an emblem of his power. After all, he had predicted that Peter would deny knowing him, and so that humiliation only leads to his victory. Before Pilate, Jesus exposes the emptiness of earthly authority. ("You would have no power over Me, if it were not given to you from above.") As this exchange takes place, the tonality is yanked from D minor, with one flat, to C-sharp minor, with four sharps. Much of Chafe's analysis is arcane, in places straining credulity; but Bach, too, was a man of arcane bent.

Marissen's readings are similarly eagle-eyed, but he is on the lookout for a grimmer strain in Lutheranism. Luther's ugliest legacy was the invective that, in his later years, he heaped on the Jewish people. His 1543 treatise "On the Jews and Their Lies" calls for the burning of synagogues and Jewish homes. "We are even at fault for not striking them dead," Luther writes. Other writings endorse the blood libel—the legend that Jews kill Christian children for ritual purposes. Such sentiments were echoed by the more strident theologians of Bach's time. One was the Hamburg pastor and poet Erdmann Neumeister. In 1720, Bach was under consideration to become the organist at Neumeister's church, and five of his cantatas set Neumeister texts. (The pastor helped to invent the cantata as Bach practiced it: a suite of recitatives, arias, and choruses on a religious topic.)

Other Lutheran theologians, particularly those in the Pietist camp, were considerably more tolerant. The musicologist Raymond Erickson has highlighted a document known as the

Gutachten, published in Leipzig in 1714, which denounces the blood libel as baseless. A Pietist named August Hermann Francke—who, according to Chafe, may have influenced the themes of the St. John Passion—advocated the conversion of Jews to Christianity, but did so in a spirit of persuasion rather than coercion. Francke also de-emphasized the idea that the Jews were primarily or solely to blame for Christ's death. He wrote, "Blame yourself, O humankind, whether of the Jews or the Gentiles. . . . Not only Caiaphas and Pilate, but I myself am the murderer." To be sure, Luther said much the same in a 1519 sermon on the Crucifixion. The vituperation of his later writings can be balanced against earlier, more generous judgments. Such were the tensions that existed in Bach's world on the question of the Jews.

The most troubling of the cantatas is "Schauet doch und sehet" ("Behold and see"), which Bach composed during his first year in Leipzig. It meditates on the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. In Lutheran culture, Marissen says, the fall of Jerusalem was thought to represent "God's punishment of Old Jerusalem for its sin of rejecting Jesus." Calov quotes Luther to the effect that contemporary Jews are "children of whoredom" who must "perish eternally." Unfortunately, it's clear that Bach paid attention to such passages. At one point, Calov notes that in the wake of Jerusalem's destruction Jews have had to experience "the same sort of thing for over 1600 years, even to this day." Marissen observes that under "1600" Bach wrote "1700." This pedantic updating hardly indicates dissent. Anti-Jewish rancor is carried over into the text of "Schauet doch." A tenor sings:

Let whole rivers of tears flow,

Because there has befallen you an irreparable loss

Of the Most High's favor

You were handled like Gomorrah,

Though not actually annihilated.

Oh, better that you were utterly destroyed

Than that one at present hears Christ's enemy blaspheming in you.

Bach's music for this recitative is queasily unstable, with dominant-seventh and diminished-seventh chords preventing the music from settling in one key area. On the word "irreparable" the harmony lands on B-flat minor, chillingly remote from the initial G minor. It is a musical picture of wandering and banishment. Yet, Marissen concludes, this cantata is a poor vehicle for righteous anger against Jews. The aching dissonances of its opening lamentation and the peculiar instrumental elaborations in the closing chorale leave a mood of overhanging gloom, as if casting doubt on the notion that contemporary Christian sinners can escape the fate meted out to the Jews.

Marissen says that his findings have often met with a frosty reception at musicological conferences. His critics have claimed that Bach cannot be anti-Jewish, because a cantata like "Schauet doch und sehet" does not actually name Jews as enemies, and because violence against

Jews is nowhere advocated in Bach's work. These objections show a shallow understanding of the psychology of bigotry. The weakest protest holds that any noxious views are mitigated, or even annulled, by the greatness of Bach's music. Marissen is properly aghast: "The aesthetic magnificence of Bach's musical settings surely makes these great cantatas *more*, not less, problematic. The notion that beauty trumps all really is too good to be true."

That judgment applies to the Passions, and to the St. John most of all. Of the Evangelists, John is the most vindictive toward the Jews, and many Baroque settings of his Passion narrative preserve that animus. The libretto of Bach's St. John, by an unidentified author, is based in part on a text devised by the Hamburg poet Barthold Heinrich Brockes—a lurid treatment that was set by Handel and Telemann, among others. One aria speaks of "you scum of the world," of "dragon's brood" spitting venom in the Saviour's face. Brockes's libretto identifies the soldiers who scourge Jesus as Jews—a departure from the New Testament.

Bach's libretto is somewhat less severe. The "scum of the world" lines are excised, and the scourging of Jesus is ascribed not to Jewish soldiers but to Pilate. Were these enlightened choices on the part of Bach or his collaborator? There is no way of knowing, but Marissen speculates that Bach, following Lutheran convention, wished to shift emphasis from the perfidy of the Jews to the guilt of all participants in the Passion scene and, by extension, to present-day sinners.

Still, the Jews retain enemy status, their presence felt in a series of bustling, bristling choruses. Many of these pieces share an instrumental signature—sixteenth notes in the strings, oboes chirping above. Several exhibit upward-slithering chromatic lines. Bouts of counterpoint create a disputatious atmosphere. All this fits the stereotype of "Jewish uproar"—of a noisy, obstinate people. At the same time, the choruses are lively, propulsive, exciting to sing and hear. When the Jews tell Pilate, "We have a law, and by the law he ought to die," the music is oddly infectious, full of jaunty syncopations. This incongruous air of merriment conveys how crowds can take pleasure in hounding individuals. Moreover, the chorus in which the Jews protest the designation of Jesus as "King of the Jews" echoes a chorus of Roman soldiers sardonically crying the same phrase. Ultimately, Bach seems interested more in portraying the dynamics of righteous mobs than in stereotyping Jews. The choicest irony is that he uses his own celebrated art of fugue as a symbol of malicious scheming.

The Jews behave similarly in the St. Matthew Passion, where the crowd's cry of "*Laß ihn kreuzigen!*" ("Let him be crucified") is articulated as a driving, demonic fugue. Marissen highlights Bach's handling of the phrase "his blood be on us and on our children," which was widely taken to be a curse that Jews cast upon themselves. The St. Matthew mitigates this threat of eternal damnation with the magisterial alto aria "*Können Tränen meiner Wangen*" ("If the tears of my cheeks"), in which an image of dripping blood, palpably notated in the music, is transmuted into one of melancholy grace. Marissen discerns a theological message: the Jews' curse is borne by all and, on pious reflection, turns into a blessing.

Such gestures help to explain why the Bach Passions have long found an audience far beyond Lutheran congregations. In 1824, Bella Salomon, an observant Jew living in Berlin, gave a copy of the St. Matthew to her grandson, Felix Mendelssohn, who resolved to lead a performance. His revival of the work, in 1829, inaugurated the modern cult of Bach. Although Mendelssohn had

converted to Christianity, he remained conscious of his Jewish origins. The scholar Ruth HaCohen speculates that Bach's "ecumenical, inclusive dialogue" opened a space in which Jewish listeners could find refuge. All this is reassuring, but one cannot take too much comfort. Even if the Passions lack malice toward Jews, they treat them more as metaphors than as human beings.

We pay closer attention to Bach's texts these days because we hear them better. In 1981, the musician and scholar Joshua Rifkin offered the provocative hypothesis that the Passions should be sung not by a lineup of soloists and a chorus of dozens but by a central group of only eight voices, with a few extra voices for smaller parts. Arguments still rage around Rifkin's proposal, but the logic behind it—having to do with the way Bach prepared his vocal parts—has won many adherents. Certainly, it has yielded crisp, bracing performances. The German words jump out at you, and the clarity of the textures accentuates Bach's zest for dissonance. The music becomes at once more archaic and more modern.

That paradox animates John Butt's book on the Passions. He is one of the finest modern conductors of Bach; with the Dunedin Consort, based in Edinburgh, he has made incisive, expressive recordings of the Passions, the B-Minor Mass, and the Christmas Oratorio. His version of the St. John reconstructs how the piece would have unfolded at the Good Friday service in Leipzig, with choral singing and organ pieces before and after. A Buxtehude prelude preceding "Herr, unser Herrscher" amplifies the disconcerting power of Bach's music: you feel it thunder through the door. In "Bach's Dialogue with Modernity," though, Butt shows impatience with the historically minded readings favored by Chafe and Marissen. Instead, he wants to know why Bach's works have achieved such resonance through time—how this ostensibly conservative Lutheran composer "writes music that chimes with the sensibilities of a much later age."

For Butt, the heterogeneity of elements in Bach's Passions engenders a novelistic richness, a virtual world rife with ambiguity: "It is as if he had entered into a 'Faustian pact,' by which he sought for his music an extraordinarily strong power in articulating and enhancing faith within the Lutheran religion, but in doing so gave to music an autonomous logic and referential power that goes well beyond the original purpose." Addressing "Herr, unser Herrscher," Butt acknowledges the theology but concentrates on the musical texture. The overlapping of strands—the circling sixteenth notes, the pulsing eighth notes, the pungent dissonances of the oboes—makes him think of human beings interacting: voices in conversation, bodies erotically intertwined. At the same time, he senses a mechanical process, a huge machine in motion. All these conflicting images spring to mind even before the voices enter.

A different kind of ambiguity arises in the solo arias, where tensions between voice and accompaniment often conjure the desperation of the beleaguered soul. The St. John Passion aria "Ach, mein Sinn" ("Ah, my mind"), a reflection on Peter's denial, depicts a traumatized, flailing spirit. The tenor starts out in synch with the ritornello; attempts to assume an independent melodic shape; and then, failing that, tries to join up with the accompaniment again. All the while, the instruments churn through their material, indifferent to the singer's plight. Butt calls it a "representation of a human who loses the way set out for him."

This air of being lost in a world of ungraspable dimensions is crucial to the experience of the Passion as a whole. Above all, Butt observes, we are lost in time. In the arias and choruses, time seems to stop, as we sink into a particular emotional or spiritual condition. Elsewhere, time hurtles ahead: unpredictable harmonic schemes generate suspense at every turn of this most familiar of stories. Furthermore, Butt maps multiple time worlds, or “time zones,” in the Passions: the recitatives and dialogues, which plunge us into the midst of the New Testament narrative; the stern, stately chorales, which are like voices calling out from the era of Luther; and the arias and big choruses, which, in operatic style, show the lessons and moods of the Passion being absorbed into the Baroque present of Leipzig.

Butt relates Bach’s complex sense of time to the evolving Christian understanding of eschatology, of the nature of the Second Coming. When, after the early Christian era, the Last Judgment no longer seemed imminent, the idea of “realized eschatology” emerged: the believer could glimpse the world to come within the span of his own life. At the same time, Butt is reminded of Frank Kermode’s theory that in the modern era the concept of the apocalyptic shifts from the future into the present, into a state of “eternal transition, perpetual crisis.” In that state Bach permanently resides.

This music can be more beautiful than anyone’s, but it refuses to blot out the ugliness of the world. As Butt says, Bach’s works “agitate the listeners on one level while calming them on another.” Comfort and catharsis are not the point. For that reason, the discomfiting focus on the role of the Jews should be welcome. Bach’s vexations, his rages, his blind spots, even his hatreds, are our own. The musical literature tends to present him as a mastermind exerting uncanny control over his creations, but he, too, may have been caught in the labyrinth of his imagination. What he gives us—what he perhaps gave himself—is a way of coming to terms with extreme emotion. He does not console; he commiserates. “Herr, unser Herrscher” notwithstanding, Bach is no Byzantine deity gazing from the dome. He walks beside you in the night. ♦

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