

## THE VOCAL MUSIC OF J.S. BACH<sup>1</sup>

### CLASS 8 Nov 9

### LEIPZIG—ST. JOHN PASSION

#### Outline

#### 1. St. John Passion

Background: history of the passion story set to music

The work itself: story, text, dramatic nature, performance forces, dramatic elements, integration of music with story.

Excerpts with description of scenes

#### 2. Dance rhythms in Baroque music

#### 3. Cantata 82, "Ich habe genug" (I have enough)

The story of the suffering and death of Christ had been portrayed in Christian services on Good Friday for many centuries before Bach. Sometimes the story was chanted. Over the years, chanting turned into more elaborate musical preparation, with different singers taking the parts of different characters. By the early Baroque, composers like Heinrich Schütz were writing elaborate settings of the story with instrumental ensembles, choruses, and soloists. But even these works could not have prepared listeners monumental passion settings by Bach.

In his two surviving passions, Bach uses a tenor to narrate the action using verses from the Bible. Other solo voices play the characters in the drama. At many points, Bach freezes the story to allow one or two of the soloists, or the entire chorus, to comment on what has just occurred. He also inserts chorales, which would have been familiar to his listeners, with texts written just for the piece. At the beginning and end of the St. John Passion are two large choruses that bookend the work.

To knit the Biblical story into a compelling drama, Bach uses a range of conventions from theater and opera of the period. John Eliot Gardiner comments: "He uses suspense and the satisfying arc of traditional narrative, including conflict, crisis, and resolution, and sustains it at a pitch of musico-theatrical intensity beyond that of any opera score of the period."

**B**ach was the great master of the instrumental introduction. He opens his St. John Passion with a powerful mix of swirling emotions from the orchestra, including a sharp dissonance in the flutes and oboes. The chorus enters with dense punctuated chords. On the key line "Lord, show us by your Passion that you triumph even in deepest humiliation," the voices descend to their lowest notes on the words "deepest humiliation" (grössten Niedrigkeit), then rise again on the words "you are glorified" (verherrlicht worden bist).

John Eliot Gardiner comments:

For pictorial vividness and tragic vision, the turbulent orchestral introduction is without parallel. Like a true overture, it beckons us into the drama... The relentless tremulant pulsation generated by the reiterated bass line, and the persistent sighing figure in the violas and the swirling motion in the violins so suggestive of turmoil, even of the physical surging of the crowd—all contribute to the unique pathos. Over this ferment, pairs of oboes and flutes locked in lyrical dialogue but with anguished dissonances enact a very different kind of physicality, one that can create a harrowing portrayal of nails being driven into bare flesh...

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But then the bass line, static for the first nine bars, begins to move downwards chromatically, and the music begins to well up and intensify. With the entry of the chorus, something of unprecedented shocking power occurs: in place of words of lamentation, Bach introduces a song of praise of the universal reign of Christ ... a unique occurrence in Passion settings of the time. The voices enter together in three isolated stabs: *Herr! ... Herr! ... Herr!* The impression of dual *Affekt* could hardly be clearer: an evocation and portrayal of Christ in majesty like some colossal Byzantine mosaic, but one who is looking down on the maelstrom of distressed unregenerate humanity below.

1. chorus, "Herr, unser Herrscher, dessen Ruhm"

Herr, unser Herrscher, dessen Ruhm In allen Landen herrlich ist! Zeig uns durch deine Passion, Daß du, der wahre Gottessohn, Zu aller Zeit, Auch in der größten Niedrigkeit, Verherrlicht worden bist!	Lord, our ruler, Whose fame In every land is glorious! Show us, through Your passion, That You, the true Son of God, Through all time, Even in the greatest humiliation, Have become transfigured!
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VIDEO: John Eliot Gardiner, "Bach: a passionate life" 56:00-1:00:10

The Evangelist (tenor) then begins his narration with a *secco* recitative—just the singer plus keyboard and a bass instrument. The Last Supper is finished. Jesus has gone with his disciples to pray. But Judas has betrayed him, and soldiers arrive to arrest him. Bach dramatizes the narrative with details of harmony and rhythm. At the name "Judas" we get an unsettled diminished chord. When soldiers arrive the pace becomes agitated. As Jesus is introduced we hear a smoother narrative line and harmonies shift into major.

Jesus asks, "Whom do you seek?" The soldiers respond sharply, "Jesus of Nazareth!" The chorus sometimes plays the part of soldiers, sometimes an angry crowd, sometimes the Christian faithful commenting on the action. Jesus repeats his question, "Whom do you seek," and the soldiers again respond with hostility. Jesus answers, "I have told you that I am the one you want. If you seek me, then let my disciples go." Next Bach gives us the first commentary as the chorus sings the chorale, "O great love that brought you to this path of martyrdom."

The disciple Peter rashly draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus reprimands him, and the chorus of the faithful asks to be as faithful to God's will as Jesus was.

Jesus is bound and taken away. Next we have an aria from the alto soloist, who says Jesus allowed himself to be bound so that I can be unbound from my sins. As she sings, two oboes depict the binding of Jesus with crisscrossing melodies. Then comes a sweet innocent aria for soprano and two flutes, "I will follow you, my life and light."

9. aria S "Ich folge dir gleichfalls mit freudigen Schritten" (I follow you likewise with happy steps)

Ich folge dir gleichfalls mit freudigen Schritten Und lasse dich nicht, Mein Leben, mein Licht. Befördre den Lauf, Und höre nicht auf, Selbst an mir zu ziehen, zu schieben, zu bitten.	I follow You likewise with happy steps and do not leave You, my Life, my Light. Pursue your journey, and don't stop, continue to draw me on, to push me, to urge me.
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The next section takes place in the court of the high priest. Jesus asks, “If I spoke no wrong, why did you strike me?” This is followed by another chorale melody in Bach’s gripping harmonization.

11. chorale “We hat dich so geschlagen?” (Who has struck you thus?)

<p>Wer hat dich so geschlagen, Mein Heil, und dich mit Plagen So übel zugericht' ? Du bist ja nicht ein Sünder Wie wir und unsre Kinder, Von Missetaten weißt du nicht.</p>	<p>Who has struck you thus, my Savior, and with torments so evilly used You? You are not at all a sinner like us and our children, You know nothing of transgressions.</p>
<p>Ich, ich und meine Sünden, Die sich wie Körnlein finden Des Sandes an dem Meer, Die haben dir erreget Das Elend, das dich schläget, Und das betrübte Marterheer.</p>	<p>I, I and my sins, that can be found like the grains of sand by the sea, these have brought You this misery that assails You, and this tormenting martyrdom.</p>

The crowd asks Peter, “Aren’t you one of his disciples?” Peter denies it. One man asks, “Didn’t I see you in the garden with him?” Again Peter denies it. When the cock crows, Peter remembers Jesus’ prophesy that a disciple would deny him, and weeps bitterly. On the words “weeps bitterly” (weinete bitterlich) Bach gives us agonized chromaticism, a heartfelt cry of anguish, as emotional as an impassioned aria.

12c. recitative, “Er leugnete aber und sprach” (He denied it however and said)

<p>Da verleugnete Petrus abermal, und alsobald krähete der Hahn. Da gedachte Petrus an die Worte Jesu und ging hinaus und weinete bitterlich.</p>	<p>Then Peter denied it again, and just then the cock crew. Then Peter recalled Jesus' words and went out and wept bitterly.</p>
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We hear a song of remorse from the soloist, then the complex chorale that closes part I, combining a description of Peter weeping after he realized what he had done, a plea from the Christian faithful, their description of the lives, and their statement of peace and faith.

**P**art II begins with a short punchy chorale about what happened to Jesus, what he has done for the faithful, and what will happen to him now. Jesus is taken to the high priest, then to Pontius Pilate. Pilate asks the crowd “What charge do you bring against this man?” The chorus, acting as the angry crowd, shouts, “We wouldn’t have brought him here if he weren’t a criminal!” This intense exchange continues with dissonant chromaticism and insistent hammering of repeated notes.

Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” As Jesus answers that his kingdom is not here (“aber nun ist mein Reich nicht von dannen”), agitation subsides, and the music modulates to major, suggesting that Jesus is thinking about his real kingdom in heaven.

Pilate announces he will release one of the two prisoners, and asks them which one they want. They shout, “Not this one (Jesus) but Barabbas!” (Nicht diesen, sondern Barabbam!) Jesus is taken away and whipped, which Bach vividly describes in music on the word “geisselte” (whipped). The bass sings a tender and moving aria accompanied by two violas d’amore, expressing the idea that from, Jesus’ suffering comes the highest good.

19. aria B, “Betrachte, meine Seel, mit angstlichen Vergnügen” (Contemplate, my soul, with anxious pleasure)

Betrachte, meine Seel, mit ängstlichem Vergnügen, Mit bitterer Lust und halb beklemmtem Herzen Dein höchstes Gut in Jesu Schmerzen, Wie dir auf Dornen, so ihn stechen, Die Himmelsschlüsselblumen blühn! Du kannst viel süße Frucht von seiner Wermut brechen Drum sieh ohn Unterlass auf ihn!	Contemplate, my soul, with anxious pleasure, with bitter joy and half-constricted heart, your highest Good in Jesus' suffering, how for you, out of the thorns that pierce Him, the tiny 'keys of Heaven' bloom! You can pluck much sweet fruit from his wormwood; therefore gaze without pause upon Him!
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Soldiers place a crown of thorns and a purple cloak on Jesus. The chorus (as soldiers) mock him saying, “Hail, King of the Jews,” with flutes and oboes playing in a sardonic 16th-note rhythm. The high priests scream “Crucify him!” in a brutal chorus. Then an exchange between Pilate, seeking a way to release Jesus, and the angry crowd that wants him dead.

As the Evangelist says, “He handed over Jesus to be crucified,” the orchestra lands on an unexpected D Major chord, suggesting the final victory that comes from Jesus’ suffering. The bass now sings the energetic and vivid aria, “Hurry to Golgatha,” including the line “You will be revived there.”

Soldiers take Jesus’ cloak, and cast lots for it in a surprisingly merry chorus full of fast runs, and repeated eighth notes. This is Bach’s picture of people wrapped up in the bustle of their daily lives, oblivious to the momentous events happening around them.

27b. “Lasset uns den nicht zerteilen” (Let’s not divide this).

Lasset uns den nicht zerteilen, sondern darum losen, wes er sein soll.	Let's not divide this, rather let's toss for it, to see whose it will be.
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The narrator tells us how Jesus, now on the cross, tells his mother that the disciple John is now her son, and tells John that Mary is now his mother. Jesus’ final words are “Es ist vollbracht” (It is ended), followed by the well-known aria for alto accompanied by viola da gamba that begins with the same line. After a mournful start, the aria breaks into a declamatory D-major, indicating Jesus’ triumph over death.

30. Aria A “Es ist vollbracht” (It is finished)

Es ist vollbracht! O Trost vor die gekränkten Seelen! Die Trauernacht Läßt nun die letzte Stunde zählen. Der Held aus Juda siegt mit Macht Und schließt den Kampf. Es ist vollbracht!	It is finished! O comfort for the ailing soul! The night of sorrow now measures out its last hour. The hero out of Judah conquers with might and concludes the battle. It is finished!
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The narrator announces the death of Jesus, followed by a poignant bass aria in which the soloist asks, “Now that all is fulfilled, am I made free from death?” To which Jesus answers, “Yes.” In parallel, the chorus sings the same chorale that ended Part I and was heard earlier in Part II, singing “Jesus, you were dead and now live eternally. Let me follow your path.”

The tenor asks, “My heart, what will you do?” followed by an answer from the soprano “Dissolve, my heart, in floods of tears, because Jesus is dead.” Here the soloist represents a real person from the crowd who witnessed the death of Jesus.

35. “Zerfleiße, mein Herz, in Fluten der Zähren” (Dissolve, my hears, in floods of tears)

Zerfleiße, mein Herze, in Fluten der Zähren Dem Höchsten zu Ehren! Erzähle der Welt und dem Himmel die Not: Dein Jesus ist tot!	Dissolve, my heart, in floods of tears to honor the Highest! Tell the world and heaven the anguish: Your Jesus is dead!
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After a chorale, the tenor, in his lowest register, narrates the journey to the grave. At last Bach gives us the beautiful final chorus, “Ruht wohl” (Rest well), then a final chorale from the Christian faithful.

39. chorus, “Ruht wohl” (Rest well).

Ruht wohl, ihr heiligen Gebeine, Die ich nun weiter nicht beweine, Ruht wohl und bringt auch mich zur Ruh! Das Grab, so euch bestimmt ist Und ferner keine Not umschließt, Macht mir den Himmel auf und schließt die Hölle zu.	Rest well, you blessed limbs, now I will no longer mourn you, rest well and bring me also to peace! The grave that is allotted to you and encloses no further suffering, opens heaven for me and closes off Hell.
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### Importance of dance in the Baroque

**D**ance music has been around for a long time. The oldest secular instrument music we have in the West are the Estampie of the High Middle Ages. Renaissance composers used and expanded on dance forms. Baroque composers added the variety of dance forms in the composer’s tool kit. Bach used these dance forms to give structure to some of his instrumental music

Why did Baroque composers use dance forms? Dance forms give predictable structures, allowing composers to vary the other elements and offer coherence to the listener.

- Clear obvious beat; steady tempo
- Regular dance types, each with its meter, tempo, and mood, all recognizable to audiences of the time
- Phrase structures are predictable and symmetrical

Suite: a group of instrumental pieces in dance-like forms, though not intended for actual dancing. Composers of the High Baroque used a specific set of dances, mostly from France and Italy. North German composers like Bach used both “suite” and “partita” for groups of dances; they used the French names for the individual dances

In the French Baroque of the 17th century, groups of dances began to appear as concert music. Many of these were not intended for dancing, as they were too elaborate, with too much variation in the rhythm, or at the wrong tempo for actual dancing. Composers in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere soon took up the dance suites, sometimes for full orchestra, sometimes for small ensemble, and sometimes for solo harpsichord, or even violin.

Dance was especially popular in the French Royal Court. Louis XIV himself was trained as a dancer, loved to dance, and often performed onstage as part of the dance ensemble. So it no surprise composers in many countries attached french names to their dance suites.

Allemande - a stately dance in duple meter (2/4 or 4/4 in modern notation)

Courante - a faster dance in 3/4 and 6/8.

Sarabande - a slow dance in triple meter

Gigue -a fast lively dance in 6/8 meter

Composers wrote suites for harpsichord, wind and string instruments, and full orchestra. Bach wrote important suites for solo violin and cello, harpsichord, and full orchestra.

Dance rhythms appear all the time in Bach's vocal music, and modern conductors strive for a dance-y feel to their choral performances.

"Gloria," from Mass in B-minor. Maasaki Suzuki with Bach Collegium Japan. You can't get much more dance-y than this marvelous excerpt from, of all things, a Catholic mass.

"Herrscher des Himmels, erhöre das Lallen," (Ruler of Heaven, hear the murmur), chorus from Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248 III/1. Jos van Veldhoven, Netherlands Bach Society. Another lively dance number that will get your feet tapping.

Cantata 82, "Ich habe genug" (I have enough)

This is the best known of Bach's cantatas for just one solo voice. The text concerns meeting between Mary, the infant Jesus, and the old man Simeon, who immediately recognized the Messiah, and burst into song, "Now I have seen my Savior," he sang, "I can die in peace." For the faithful of Bach's time, death was a deliverance from the troubles of this world, and the opportunity to meet the Creator. The text of the cantata reflects that understanding.

The first aria depicts Simon's emotions, a mix of melancholy (listen to the oboe with its plaintive upward leap). The second aria is what Albert Schweitzer called "the lullaby for eternal sleep," inviting the listener to let go of worldly cares. The melody initially has a plaintive feel, which then becomes reassuring, and finally joyful, with a cheerful dance rhythm.

<p>1. Arie B            Ich habe genug,            Ich habe den Heiland, das Hoffen der Frommen,            Auf meine begierigen Arme genommen;            Ich habe genug!            Ich hab ihn erblickt,            Mein Glaube hat Jesum ans Herze gedrückt;            Nun wünsch ich, noch heute mit Freuden            Von hinnen zu scheiden.</p>	<p>1. Aria B            I have enough,            I have taken the Savior, the hope of the righteous,            into my eager arms;            I have enough!            I have beheld Him,            my faith has pressed Jesus to my heart;            now I wish, even today with joy            to depart from here.</p>
<p>3. Arie B            Schlummert ein, ihr matten Augen,            Fallet sanft und selig zu!            Welt, ich bleibe nicht mehr hier,            Hab ich doch kein Teil an dir,            Das der Seele könnte taugen.            Hier muß ich das Elend bauen,            Aber dort, dort werd ich schauen            Süßen Friede, stille Ruh.</p>	<p>3. Aria B            Fall asleep, you weary eyes,            close softly and pleasantly!            World, I will not remain here any longer,            I own no part of you            that could matter to my soul.            Here I must build up misery,            but there, there I will see            sweet peace, quiet rest.</p>

Resources:

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

Text and translations by Pamela Dellal from Emmanuel Church, Boston

[http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes\\_translations/nt\\_notes\\_transl\\_cantatas.htm#pab1\\_7](http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes_translations/nt_notes_transl_cantatas.htm#pab1_7)