

PROGRAM NOTES

There are two surviving Passion-oratorios by Johann Sebastian Bach, but he may have written as many as five, as is claimed in his obituary. His monumental setting of the Passion according to St. Matthew, first performed in Leipzig's Thomaskirche on April 11 (Good Friday), 1727, is the larger of the two (the other is the Johannes-Passion, BWV 245). It stands as the culmination of the genre for its scale and sophistication. The genre itself has antecedents that date back to the middle ages. Musical commemorations of Christ's suffering and crucifixion took place from the 9th Century onward with soloists' chanting of the four Gospel accounts of the Passion during Holy Week. By the 15th and 16th Centuries, polyphonic passages were incorporated in alternation with plainchant into what is known as the dramatic Passion. In 17th-century Lutheran Germany, a continued emphasis on a dramatic presentation of the story gave rise to musical settings modeled on the Italian oratorio: recitatives and choruses on the words from the Gospel narrative were mixed with arias, duets, and choruses on hymns and free texts.

The resulting Passion-oratorio ruffled the feathers of at least some listeners of Bach's time, who found the genre extravagant and undignified for the church. We get a sense of the perceived theatricality of the genre from an account (probably not about Bach's St. Matthew) by Christian Gerber, written in 1732:

"Gradually the Passion story, which had formerly been sung in simple plainchant, humbly and reverently, began to be sung with many kinds of instruments in the most elaborate fashion, occasionally mixing in a little setting of a Passion Chorale that the whole congregation joined in singing,

and then the mass of instruments fell to again. When in a large town this Passion music was done for the first time ... 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, who sang the first Passion Chorale out of their books with great devotion. But when this theatrical music began, all these people were thrown into the greatest bewilderment, looked at each other, and said, 'What will come of this?' An old widow of the nobility said, 'God save us, my children! It's just as if one were at an Opera Comedy.'"

The musical forces of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* illustrate its conception on a grand scale: the work is scored for two SATB choruses (each with accompanying ensembles of winds, strings, and continuo), plus a third choir of sopranos with organ accompaniment. Recitatives and choruses on the Gospel passages comprise the narrative level of the work. The Biblical story unfolds on this level, and Bach underscores its meanings through the use of musical symbolism. There is, for example: word painting in the well-timed earthquake following Jesus's death on the cross; number symbolism in the eleven "Herr, bin ich's (Lord, is it I)?" uttered by all of the disciples but one when Jesus announces that one will betray him; and character-delineation in Jesus's speech, which is always distinguished by an accompanying halo of strings, except for the moment in which he cries out on the cross: "Eli, Eli, lama asabthani (My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me)?"

The affective and sometimes rapturous poetry supplied by the librettist Christian Friedrich Henrici (alias Picander) and Bach's musical

responses to that poetry add a marked Pietist aura to the work. The sense of a dramatized personal involvement with a humanized Christ (allegorized as the Bridegroom whose Bride is the believing soul) is exemplified by the opening chorus. Two choirs heard in this introduction engage in a dialogue: the first choir, the Daughters of Zion, an allegorical symbol of the Church, announces the story of Christ's sacrifice; the second choir, the Christian faithful punctuates the Daughters's speech with expectant questions—"Wen (Whom)?" "Wie (How)?" "Was (What)?" Bach heightens the poignancy of this dialogue by adding the Lutheran chorale "O Lamm Gottes unschuldig, am Stamm des Kreuzes geschlachtet (O guiltless Lamb of God, slaughtered on the stem of the Cross)," which is sung by the soprano choir. Throughout the Passion the Daughters of Zion interpret or comment on the events related by the Gospel, and the chorus of the faithful react to it, often as agitated witnesses.

Similarly, several of the lyrical solos, instance a strikingly emotional tone in both their text and musical setting. The accompanied recitative "Wiewohl mein Herz in Tränen schwimmt (Although my heart swims in tears)" and aria "Ich will dir mein Herze schenken (I wish to give my heart to Thee)," sung after the events of the Last Supper, pour out the believer's responses to Christ's sufferings and their portent. In the recitative, Bach creates a flowing motif in the oboes that pervades the piece and reflects the streaming tears of the mourning believer. By contrast, the aria, virtuosic and operatic, overflows with delight in celebrating the believer's happy surrender to Christ. Also striking is the aria "Erbarme dich mein Gott (Have mercy, my God)" for alto

and obbligato violin. A masterpiece of plaintive melancholy, it occurs just at the moment in which we empathize with Peter's regret and despair over his three-fold disavowal of Jesus.

A further level of expression occurs in the traditional Lutheran chorales that Bach inserted into the Passion story. These draw on the fund of texts and melodies well known to Bach's congregation. In Bach's setting, the chorales serve as commentaries and exhortations that bring the events and meaning of the story ever closer to his congregation because of their participation in singing (or at least knowing) these texts and melodies. Particularly incisive in this regard is the moment following the disciples' chorus "Herr, bin ich's (Lord, is it I)?" in which the congregation, responds with an affirmative answer in the chorale "Ich bin's, ich sollte büßen (It is I; I should do penance)." In this moment and throughout the Passion ("O Man, bewail your sin so great"; "Although I have strayed from Thee, yet have I returned again"; "How miraculous is this punishment! The good shepherd suffers for the sheep") we are reminded of Jesus' crucifixion for the sins of mankind.

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