



Comments on the *St. John Passion* of Johann Sebastian Bach

by Lawrence Lohr

Two of the greatest works by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) are his settings for soloists, chorus, and orchestra of the Passion story, namely his *St. John Passion* from 1724, which we shall hear tonight, and his later and somewhat longer *St. Matthew Passion* from 1729. Each work recounts the events of the last days of Jesus Christ as described in the respective Gospel passages, Chapters 18 and 19 from John and Chapters 26 and 27 from Matthew. The word “passion” comes from the Latin verb “passus,” past participle of “patior,” to suffer, from which we also get our English word “compassion,” literally “to suffer with”. It is the theme of suffering “with” in order to arrive at a peaceful acceptance of the approaching end of life that lies at the heart of the Bach Passions.

In each Passion the story line is told by a tenor soloist known as the Evangelist, with the chorus representing at different times various groups such as the Disciples, Priests, or street riffraff. The chorus also sings a large number of so-called “chorales”, which are typically post-Reformation Lutheran hymns whose tunes and texts were for the most part lifted straight out of Bach’s Lutheran hymn book. Most were at least a century old in Bach’s time, and thus were already a well-known part of worship services. The texts of these hymns were often paraphrases of Psalm texts, with the number of verses often at least ten and sometimes as many as twenty! While it is often asserted that the chorales are merely homilies, asides to the narrative, I consider them to be central to the Passions. Contemplative solo arias, less numerous in *St. John* than in *St. Matthew*, comprise the third structural element in the Passions, many of which have solo instruments as accompaniment. Typically these are so-called da capo arias, meaning that just when you think the soloist has finished, he or she goes back and sings the whole thing over again! Their texts are often freely composed verse, not taken from Scripture.

St. John was first performed at the Good Friday vesper service on April 7, 1724, at the St. Thomas Lutheran Church in Leipzig, Germany, where Bach served as cantor and teacher of Latin to rowdy boys in the church school. The work was probably performed by no more than eight singers, four of whom sang both solos and choruses, the other four singing only the choruses. *St. John*, like most of Bach’s compositions, was not published in the modern sense during his lifetime. Rather, separate vocal and instrumental parts were written out by hand for the musicians’ use.

The story in *St. John* begins with the arrest of Jesus, omitting the Last Supper scene so prominent in *St. Matthew*. Both conclude with the descent from the cross and burial. *St. John* has an especially moving ending. First, a chorus having as its text “Be fully at peace, you holy bones”, and second, a lovely chorale, “O Lord, let your dear little angel at the very end carry my soul to Abraham’s bosom”, which begins as a lullaby but soon swells to a hymn of Thanksgiving in its concluding section. This chorale is the third verse of a 1569 hymn “I love Thee, Lord, with all my heart”, the text and/or tune of which Bach also used in several of his cantatas.

Neither of Bach’s settings of the Passion story includes what Mel Gibson chose as the ending of his film “The Passion of the Christ”, namely a scene of Jesus awakening in the tomb as the stone is being rolled away by unseen forces and then walking out into the sunlight. Better to save that part of the story for another day!

Now you may ask, “What happened to Mark and Luke? Aren’t they represented in Bach’s Passion works?” Well, Bach’s obituary, written by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach together with his student Johann Friedrich Agricola, did state that he had written five Passions. We have no information about the fifth, but it is now agreed that the *St. Mark Passion* referred to was one which Bach edited and

conducted in various arrangements but did not originally compose. Indeed it appeared as early as 1707 in Hamburg, where it was attributed to Reinhard Keiser. Unfortunately many of the orchestral parts from Bach's arrangements are missing. As for the *St. Luke Passion* which Bach presented in Leipzig in 1730, it is now agreed that it is the work of an unknown composer, not Bach.

Dramatic as well as musical presentations of the Passion story have a long and varied history. The medieval tradition of church based Passion plays was banned in northern Germany by Martin Luther and his followers, although the tradition continued in southern Germany. The once-a-decade stage productions of the Passion story at Oberammergau in Bavaria, next up for this year, date from the late seventeenth century after the community just barely survived an epidemic of the plague.

There is no shortage of Passion musical settings in addition to the two by Bach, just a shortage of Passion performances. In addition to his *St. Matthew Passion* of 1666, Heinrich Schütz wrote Passions based on texts from Mark, Luke, and John. Bach's own son, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, wrote more than twenty. Handel wrote one or two, his early (1704) *St. John Passion* now being thought not to be his composition after all, while his Brockes Passion (ca. 1718), based on a Passion play by the poet Brockes, is seldom performed. John Stainer's *The Crucifixion* from 1887 contains one famous chorus, "For God so loved the world", a setting of John 3:16. More recently there are Krzysztof Penderecki's *St. Luke Passion* (1965) and Arvo Pärt's *St. John Passion* (1982). The great Bach interpreter Helmuth Rilling, founder in 1969 of the Oregon Bach Festival in Eugene, commissioned a full set of four for the Passion 2000 European Music Festival, namely *St. Matthew* by Tan Dun, *St. Mark* by Osvaldo Golijov, *St. Luke* by Wolfgang Rihm, and *St. John* by Sofia Gubaidulina. And finally, do we count Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ, Superstar* or Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell*, each of which contains some elements of the Passion story?

Perhaps the most familiar chorale tune in *St. John* is that used for the text "In the bottom of my heart, your name and cross alone shine forth", a tune many know from English hymnals as that of "All glory, laud, and honor to Thee, Redeemer, King". The tune goes back to Theodulph, a Spanish (or maybe Italian) monk who wrote it while in a French prison ca. 818. The text used in *St. John* is the third verse of a hymn written by Herberger ca.1614. Its place in

St. John is immediately after Pilate has rebuked the high priests saying, "Behold what I have written, that is what I have written," responding to their request that he change the inscription on the Cross from "The King of the Jews" (abbreviated in Latin as "INRI") to "He said, that he was the King of the Jews." Especially dramatic are the two verses from the eight-verse hymn "Christ, who makes us blessed," with text by Michael Weisse from 1531 and tune from an old Bohemian Brotherhood hymn. The first verse opens Part II, while the last verse, "O help, Christ, son of God, through your bitter suffering", marks the burial of Jesus. Finally, there is the chorale based on the fourth verse ("Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.") of Martin Luther's hymn setting of the Lord's Prayer. See if you can recognize it!

Many of you have heard Good Friday sermons based on the so-called "Seven Last Words of Christ," a selection of Gospel quotations three of which are from John 19, namely the third, "Woman, behold thy son!/Behold thy mother!", the fifth, "I thirst.", and the sixth, "It is finished." Each of these three Words is sung in the second half of the *St. John*. The last of these from John is the basis for what is perhaps the most expressive aria in either of the Bach Passions, "Es ist vollbracht", perhaps better translated as "It is accomplished", sung by an alto with viola da gamba accompaniment. This aria may well have served as the model for the equally emotional aria "It is enough" from Felix Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*, sung in great despair by the bass Elijah upon hearing that Queen Jezebel wanted him slain.

The central theme in *St. John* as well as in *St. Matthew* is that all mankind, through original sin, bears the responsibility for the intense anguish endured by Jesus at the end of His earthly life. Again and again the choice of texts and their musical settings in the arias and chorales expresses the post-Reformation theology that through our own identification with this suffering we partially atone for our inherent failings and shortcomings.

The Ann Arbor Cantata Singers will perform Bach's *St. John's Passion* on April 2nd at Christ Church Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills and April 3rd at First Congregational Church in Ann Arbor. See www.a2cantatasingers.org for more information.