

## **Bach's first Leipzig Passion**

There was a time, not far distant, when public familiarity with Bach's church music was confined to a canon of four large works: the B minor Mass, the Christmas Oratorio and the two surviving Passion settings. Of these, the *St John Passion* tended to be regarded as the poor relation – considered cruder and less finely honed than the iconic *St Matthew Passion*. It is doubtful whether Bach saw things in quite this way. From the inception of his first Leipzig cantata cycle in May 1723, he set himself the herculean task of composing new music each week for all the festivals in the church year, his initial target being a minimum of two complete annual cycles, each with a Passion setting as its high point. The *St John Passion*, written for Good Friday 1724, was to be the central jewel in the necklace of cantatas he had fashioned so far.

In the course of performing and recording all of Bach's surviving church cantatas during the year 2000 we were able to witness the unstoppable creative flow of his first two years in Leipzig, the subtle and resourceful means he found to reflect and adumbrate the theological themes of each church feast, and the linking of them by twos, threes and fours in order to provide continuity from one week to the next. We became aware of how, in his choice of cantata texts and in his selection of chorales in the period before Lent 1724, Bach carefully prepared his listeners for the contemplative commentary that the chorales were to fulfil on Good Friday in his first Passion setting. Our familiarity with these cantatas also served to modify and enrich our interpretation of the work when we revisited it in 2004. It all pointed towards viewing the *St John Passion* as a climactic statement of a very personal kind in which Bach sought to crystallise a number of the themes and techniques he had been systematically developing in his cantatas over the preceding year, experimenting with different ways of combining and ordering choruses, chorales, recitatives and arias.

In his first year in Leipzig, and in the lead up to the Passion, Bach had announced himself to his Leipzig employers and listeners in bold, uncompromising terms as a creator of ‘sermons in sound’. With liturgical involvement shrunk to a minimum in the Good Friday Vespers, his music could for the first time occupy centre stage and constitute a ‘harmonious divine service’ in itself (to use Telemann’s phrase about one of his own cantata cycles). For twenty years he had been waiting for such a chance: to show on a large canvas what modern music – his music – could do towards defining and strengthening belief. This was his largest-scale work to date, one comprising forty separate movements and lasting over one hundred minutes, and since it greatly exceeded any liturgical needs or directives, one can understand John Butt’s view that it was ‘patently over-written’.

To set the *St John Passion* in context, we might begin by taking a bird’s-eye view of the considerable diversity of musical fare available to worshippers during Passiontide right across Saxony around this time. In Leipzig on Good Friday 1717, for example, a Passion oratorio (author and composer unknown) was being performed for the first time during the morning service at the *Neukirche*. Up the road at St Thomas’s, in time-honoured fashion, the *Thomaner* were quietly delivering the mainly monophonic setting of the *St John Passion* traditionally attributed to Luther’s musical adviser, Johann Walter, while several miles to the west in the castle church at Gotha, none other than Bach himself had travelled from his post in Weimar to deputise for the indisposed resident court composer in a performance of up-to-the-minute Passion music. Was Bach, in 1717, performing someone else’s music, or his own – conceivably an early version of his lost *St Mark Passion*? Neither the music nor the text has been recovered, but subsequent Passion settings over the next few years give us a clue to the tastes then prevalent at the court of the Duke of Saxe-Gotha, with his small hand-picked audience, and at similar courts throughout Germany. In 1719 a

Passion meditation by Reinhard Keiser to a libretto by Hunold was being performed at Gotha, and in 1725, a year after the *St John Passion*, the new *Kapellmeister*, Stölzel, presented his setting of Brockes' Passion. The language of Hunold and Brockes is physically explicit, garish and saccharine by turns, but it clearly corresponded to a type of non-liturgical devotional literature in vogue at ducal courts and in a cosmopolitan city such as Hamburg. How far Bach went down this road in his Gotha Passion of 1717 (always assuming that such a work ever existed) is hard to say, though some scholars think that movements from it were recycled in his second version of the *St John Passion* in 1725.

In the early years of the eighteenth century an appetite had clearly grown for Passiontide meditations in music in a variety of forms. There were thus new opportunities for composers to meet this demand, just as there had been for painters on either side of the denominational divide in the previous century (the key figures then, of course, being Rubens and Rembrandt). For sections of the clergy, these innovations were to be cautiously welcomed since 'devotion... must always be renewed, animated, and as it were, fanned, otherwise sleep will be the sequel'. Introducing Stölzel's setting of Brockes' Passion, the court preacher in Gotha wrote, 'This story is so diligently presented that Christ seems to be portrayed before its hearers' very eyes and crucified again among them.' And that was surely the point. New music could now be attached to texts in which the Passion story was retold in graphic, even lurid, terms, with periodic eruptions of outrage and protest – a kind of heckling by the contemporary witnesses – built into the narration.

All the ingredients for an explosive Bach première were therefore in place on 7 April 1724. The faithful of Leipzig had particular sensitivities to what they considered fitting in musical terms to mark this most important of services in the Lutheran year and their entrenched scepticism would have left them unprepared for Bach's adventurous

musical and religious thought. He himself later confessed to the authorities that his music was ‘incomparably harder and more intricate’ than any other music performed at the time and required, as a result, a better quality of musician – and more of them. A document has survived from 1732, which provides us with a clue as to their likely reaction. The Pietist pastor Christian Gerber describes how:

*Fifty and more years ago it was the custom for the organ to remain silent in church on Palm Sunday, and on that day, because it was the beginning of Holy Week, there was no music. But 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 which 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 – with twelve violins, 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, 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?’*

While we cannot be certain whether this refers to Bach in Leipzig (some scholars consider Dresden as more likely) Christian Gerber’s account reveals one end of the critical spectrum. Unfortunately there is no direct testimony as to how Bach’s Passion setting was received, but given the prominence of Good Friday commemorations in the Leipzig social and religious calendar and the relative novelty of figural music (authorised and accepted by the city fathers only in the last three years) we can be sure that it was controversial. How could it have been otherwise? None of Bach’s contemporaries, and certainly none of his

predecessors, had ambitions for exegetical music on an equivalent scale. He might have slipped his Passion text under the radar of Consistorial scrutiny on this occasion, but by taking matters into his own hands in announcing its performance in the *Thomaskirche* when it was the turn of the *Nikolaikirche*, he may inadvertently have put both the councilmen and the clergy on their guard. Just reading the printed libretto might have been enough to antagonise them before they had heard a note of his music. It was certainly an omen of further more heated and, for the most part, undocumented disputes surrounding the *St John Passion* over the next fifteen years. These caused him to revise it no less than four times, twice bowing to clerical pressure to alter its tone and doctrinal slant and with major readjustments to its music; once, in 1739, to abandon it altogether for a further ten years, and then in one last hurrah to revive it a final time or two, boldly restored to its original state. Perhaps this was the return he was seeking – not just on the exceptional artistic effort expended at its inception, but on the vast amount of thought he had invested in planning and shaping one of the most intricate designs for any of his major works.

One of Bach's most fundamental (and probably contentious) initial decisions was to give particular prominence to the figure of Christ, who dominates the *St John* to a far greater degree than he does the later *St Matthew*. In contrast to the image of Christ we gain from the synoptic Gospels, which give repeated emphasis to his humanity, he is portrayed in this version as a majestic figure, as *Christus victor*, with foreknowledge and control of his destiny, utterly focussed on his task and seemingly unaffected by the vicissitudes of his trial. Having chosen to reflect John's emphasis on Christ's authority, Bach goes on to explore its implications for humanity, following the theme of Jesus' glorification through humiliation. This approach had a perfectly respectable pedigree, which theologians have traced back to the early Greek fathers' view of the atonement. Furthermore it was one endorsed

by Luther himself, who claimed that ‘the Gospel of John is unique in loveliness and, in truth, the principal Gospel, far superior to the other three and much to be preferred.’ In it one finds a ‘masterly account of how faith in Christ conquers sin, death, and hell; and gives life, righteousness and salvation’.

So why should this have been an especially controversial approach in Leipzig in 1724? From our less theologically nuanced perspective, it seems incomprehensible that the Leipzig clergy should have had any qualms about the theological complexion of Bach’s *St John Passion*. Yet take his decision to follow his sublime closing chorus, ‘Ruht wohl, ihr heiligen Gebeine’, with a final chorale. In performance it is obvious that the chorale serves to return us to the here and now and to remove the last vestiges of grief and uncertainty. The first half of the chorale, focusing on the grave’s repose, is suitably understated. But at the mention of the ‘final day’, the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come, Bach ratchets up the tension. Spaces between the four voices begin to open up and he hits his most magisterial stride. Six of the next seven cadences are ‘perfect’ and in the major, imbuing the music with colossal strength. The single exception in the minor is reserved for the repeated plea ‘erhöre mich... erhöre mich’ (‘hear me... hear me’). Easter is still two days away, but the affirmation here is positive and conclusive. And that may have been Bach’s most grievous error as seen through the eyes of the Leipzig clergy: to anticipate the Resurrection or the ‘final day’ was to jar with the prevalently sombre mood of the traditional Good Friday commemorations.

To us, though perhaps not to Bach’s contemporary listeners, it is obvious that like so much of the greatest western painting and music of the last millennium the *St John Passion* was conceived both as a work of art and as an act of worship in itself. How else are we to explain the extraordinary seriousness and sense of purpose that it exudes? The sheer conviction of Bach’s vision, its vivid particularity, inspired by, as it

was then thought, John's eyewitness account of the Passion story, is apparent from the outset. The choral prologue, 'Herr, unser Herrscher', seems to sweep all before it. Even when approaching it from the vantage point of the preceding church cantatas, with their astonishing array of distinctive opening movements, this grand tableau is unprecedented both in scale and *Affekt*. In common with the prologues to two later works, the *St Matthew Passion* and the *B minor Mass*, the opening bars of the *St John Passion* carry within them the seeds of the entire work. As a conductor, one senses that the entire unfolding of the successive narrative and contemplative movements of the work is predicated on that initial downbeat. The way one gives it can determine much more than just the pacing of the movement: it can affect the tone and mood of the entire work and the degree of success, if any, it may have in pulling the listener into active participation in the performance and widening the terms of reference beyond Bach's intended meaning.

For this most crucial day in the liturgical year Bach evolves a structure, a subtle balance between the narrative and the contemplative, that no other composer had hitherto dared put into place. His aim seems to have been to juxtapose vivid, dramatic reenactment and scene-setting with stretches of persuasive exposition of its meaning for the listener. To this end he establishes a three-dimensional exchange of utterance between the Evangelist, Jesus, the minor characters and the crowd. He shows an instinctive feel for the right moment to break this pattern and to slow the pace, and to intercalate solo arias in order to attach personal relevance to the unfolding events. There were sound theological precedents for his scheme in the way Lutherans were instructed first to read their Bible, then to meditate on its meaning, and finally to pray – in that order. John makes it clear that consolation ('Trost') and joy ('Freude') are the eventual outcome of Jesus' victory over death; Bach's plan is to chart the course of this hard-won victory through a retelling of John's account of Christ's Passion,

staying utterly faithful to his words – not paraphrased as with Brockes' and others' versions – and to punctuate the narration first with spiritual commentary by means of ariosos and arias, and then with pauses for collective contemplation in the form of the chorales. Here his listeners could voice (or hear voiced) their collective response, with the comfort of words and melodies familiar since childhood – the most direct form of address between the believer and his God.

As anyone knows who has ever experienced the *St John Passion*, participating either from the outside as a listener or from the inside as a performer, the placement of the chorales is central to the overall experience – their tunes symmetrical and solidly crafted, Bach's harmonisations marvellously lucid. It is fruitless to try to separate out their harmonic richness from the exquisite shaping of all three lower lines, each one a melody in its own right. The intersection of these vertical and horizontal planes is crucial – in the old sense of the word – to one's experience of them. Regardless of one's religious views, the chorales pull the action into the here and now, forcing one to consider its significance. After the action-filled narration they stand out as islands of sanity and as a welcome reaction to the unremitting interventions of the crowd. The ferocity and sheer nastiness of these outbursts is chilling, especially as it reflects us all, and not just the Jews and Romans. In Luther's and perhaps Bach's view we are all *simul iustus et peccator*, both sinless and sinning, and thus inescapably implicated in the mob frenzy and mindless brutality.

Theologians have drawn attention to John's way of inscribing a pendulum-like curve for Christ's presence here 'below' in the world. Beginning its downward swing with his Incarnation, it reaches its nadir with the Crucifixion, which is itself the start of the upswing to his Ascension and return to the world 'above'. Bach is at pains to replicate this pendular swing in the tonal planning of his *Passion*, but also to complement it (you don't need to be able to clock all the modulations,



but you can hardly avoid being aware of their overall trajectory). At the mid-point of the Passion Bach places his longest aria, 'Erwäge, wie sein blutgefärbter Rücken' (No.20), which evokes the rainbow, the symbol of the ancient covenant between God and Noah after the flood. He thus inscribes his own symmetrical arc, mirroring the curve of Christ's presence on earth. Tonality, when seen as a system of twenty-four freely circulating keys, was still of very recent origin, crystallised in Bach's encyclopaedic survey, 'The Well-tempered Clavier' (1722). It was his most up-to-date means to organise the shape and contours of his Passion, and he used it for contrast: to amplify the existing verbal narrative, to bring things into sharper focus and to vary the rate of tonal change at key junctures. On the one hand it could serve to increase the tension in the central trial scene by means of a more rapid switch of keys, helping to propel the action forward breathlessly – almost in 'real' time. On the other it could slow it down, as for the narration of Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial, as though compensating for the abbreviated account in John's Gospel.

Eric Chafe has identified nine differentiated key regions that divide the work by tonal 'ambitus', with a 'sharp' area at the centre and 'flat' areas at the periphery. He argues that Bach uses it to underscore the fundamental oppositions within John's theology, so that, for example, Jesus' sufferings are associated with flat keys, but their benefits for humankind are articulated in sharp keys. 'While the physical events of the narrative tend downward leading towards the death of Jesus... the ultimate direction is upward, suggesting John's perception of the crucifixion as a lifting up.' Thus 'the overarching allegory in the "Jesus of Nazareth" choruses is unquestionably the ability of faith to see the truth through appearances'. If Chafe is right we would have to conclude that such an ingenious and comprehensive strategy of code and symbol could only have been conceived by a religiously motivated, probing mind.

The springboard of Bach's achievement in this scripturally inspired work, more so than in the *St Matthew Passion*, is his direct interaction with the Gospel itself: its underlying themes, its antitheses and symbols. The symbols spring to life every time the music is performed and help us to make sense of the outrage and pain of suffering, the contradictions and perplexities of the Passion story. Bach connects all the way through with the essential humanity of John's account and brings it to the surface with the sympathetic realism of a Caravaggio or a Rembrandt. His equivalent to their masterly brushwork is his highly developed sense of narrative drama and his unerring feel for an appropriate scale and 'tone' for each scene. Akin to the priority both painters gave to the axis of darkness and its opposite is the way Bach's music is suffused with a light which even by his standards is exceptional in its transcendence.

It is peculiarly difficult for us to comprehend the degree of workmanship, of formal production in a work as complex as the *St John Passion*. Any fragmentary contextual knowledge we might be capable of piecing together will not – cannot – reproduce the experience of listeners at its first performance, though it might serve to sharpen our response to the music. Its original habitation is irretrievably lost. But each time the work is performed and heard anew we appropriate it: we anchor it in our time, and in so doing, connect with the timeless fertility of Bach's imagination. Without ever drawing attention to the technical workings that underpin his compositional skill, Bach has left us music which is by turns evocative, stirring, exultant and profoundly moving, music that holds our attention from beginning to end. In this he found his own first triumphant vindication of Luther's injunction that 'Christ's Passion must be met not with words or forms, but with life and truth.'

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