

## Bach's St. John Passion | Program Notes

### A Passion with Passion

by Jeannette Sorrell

#### I. THE STORY (Read This Part Before the Performance!)

*This is a “dramatic presentation” of the St. John Passion. Though we have provided the complete libretto and translation, we invite you to disregard it for the next two hours, and let yourself watch the stage and contemplate the music. We are singing in German but you only need to know the following:*

The setting is Jerusalem in the year C.E. 33. A turbulent “overture” or introductory chorus paints a musical picture of humanity’s distress and chaos, and of the tumultuous events about to unfold. We meet our narrator - the Apostle John, also called the Evangelist - who was Jesus’ most “beloved disciple.” John will relay his eyewitness account of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus.

Scene 1 takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane in the evening. A band of men has arrived to arrest Jesus and take him to the High Priest for questioning. The High Priest’s soldiers were tipped off by Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Jesus is bound and led away. The scene concludes with an aria sung by the alto with oboes in sinuous dialogue, reflecting how Jesus has been bound and shackled in order to liberate us from the shackles of our sins.

In Scene 2, John tells us how he (the “beloved disciple”) and his comrade Simon Peter followed the soldiers to the palace and observed Jesus’ interrogation by the High Priest. As the night grows cold, bystanders recognize Peter as one of Jesus’ disciples. Peter denies it. By dawn, when the cock crows, Peter has denied Jesus three times. This had been predicted by Jesus just 12 hours ago, at his last supper with his disciples. Peter is filled with remorse and cries bitterly. The scene concludes with an aria sung by tenor (reflecting on the remorse that comes from sin); and a chorale (hymn) sung by the Chorus, asking God to teach us through our conscience.

After intermission, the Chorus tells us what will now unfold: Jesus will be led before a godless throng, falsely convicted, scorned and spat upon, all as the Word (the scriptures and Old Testament prophets) had predicted.

Scene 3 is Jesus’ trial before the Roman governor, Pilatus (in Latin) or Pontius Pilate. The Chief Priests have brought Jesus to Pilate for judgment, but Pilate tells them to take him away and judge him according to their own laws. The priests and the mob cry out that they do not have the authority to do put someone to death, since the Jews are governed by Rome. Pilate goes into the Judgment Hall and questions Jesus. Finding no fault in Jesus, he returns to the mob outside and offers to release him. But the mob wants a different prisoner released – Barrabas, a murderer. Then Pilate has Jesus flogged, hoping this will be enough to satisfy the mob. The scene concludes with an arioso sung by baritone (meditating on the crown of thorns that will pierce Jesus’ head, which will bear Heaven-scented flowers, a precious gift for us) and an aria sung by tenor, contemplating the image of Jesus’ blood-spattered body as a rainbow of hope in the Heavens.

In Scene 4, the soldiers in the Judgment Hall dress the flogged Jesus in the crown of thorns and a purple robe. Pilate brings Jesus outside to the crowd. The priests and the mob cry, “Crucify him!” The exasperated Pilate tells them to take

Jesus if they want, repeating that he himself finds no fault in him. The crowd replies that Jesus must perish as he claimed to be the Son of God. Pilate is frightened by the mob's fury. He returns into the Judgment Hall again to ask Jesus, "Where are you from?" He begs Jesus to answer so that he can help him. Jesus replies only that Pilate has no power to help him – true power comes from above. Pilate tries to find a way to release Jesus. The mob outside tells Pilate that if he releases Jesus, he is going against Caesar, since Jesus made himself a King. Pilate brings Jesus out again and the crowd again cries, "Crucify him!" Finally Pilate delivers Jesus to be crucified. Jesus is led away, bearing his own cross to the Place of Skulls (Golgotha). The scene concludes with an aria for bass, calling us all as the people of God to run to Golgotha where salvation awaits us.

Scene 5 is the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Pilate writes an inscription that is placed on the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The crowd wants Pilate to change it to indicate that Jesus is the one who said he was their Lord. Pilate has had enough of the mob and tells them, "What I have written shall be as I have written." Then the soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothes – this is a wild and greedy race of words by the Chorus. In his final hour, Jesus sees his mother Mary standing by, as well as "the beloved disciple" (John). He asks John to care for Mary as his own mother. Then Jesus says, "It is fulfilled." This is followed by a contemplative aria sung by alto, with a plaintive viola da gamba solo. Jesus breathes his last, and then an aria for bass and chorus reflects on the hope that Jesus' death gives us: *Are we now free from Death, because Jesus died for us?*

In the short Scene 6, Nature responds violently to Jesus' death: the veil of the temple is rent in two, the earth is shaken and graves are opened up. A short reflective arioso for tenor contemplates the frightening earthquake. The scene concludes with a sorrowful aria for soprano, lamenting Jesus' death.

In Scene 7, John describes the burial of Jesus. The Chorus lays Jesus to rest by singing the beautiful and famous "Ruht wohl" (Rest well, my beloved, be fully at peace"). A brief epilogue by the Chorus contemplates the mystical hope in Jesus' death and the ecstatic joy we will find in our own death, as we will be reunited with our Savior whom we praise eternally.

## II. THE MUSIC

### Bach Composes a Daring New Masterpiece

*Last Saturday at noon, four wagons arrived here from Cöthen laden with the household effects belonging to the former Kapellmeister at the court of the Prince of that place who has now been invited to become Cantor in Leipzig. At two o'clock he himself arrived with his family and moved into the newly-renovated residence at the Thomasschule.*

Thus, as the Leipzig press reported, did Bach and his family begin a new life in 1723. There are few musicians today who would give up a comfortable, well-paid post as resident musician to a Prince in exchange for a difficult and enormous church job. The fact that Johann Sebastian Bach decided in 1723 to trade his pleasant palace-musician post in Cöthen for the job of Kantor at Leipzig says much about the beliefs that shaped his life. The Leipzig position was a step downwards on the social scale, and it involved an almost insurmountable workload: composing, directing and performing a new cantata every Sunday, assembling and directing an orchestra every week, teaching the boys' choir at the Thommasschule, and even teaching non-musical subjects such as Latin. There can be only one reason why Bach took this position: he wanted to compose sacred music.

Bach was a profoundly religious man, famous for such comments in his keyboard teaching as, "the aim and final reason of the *basso continuo*, as of all music, should be none else but the glory of God and the refreshing of the mind." In Leipzig he immediately set to work, composing inspired cantatas that brought worlds of artistry to the contemplation of the traditional scriptures. His cantatas during Lent during that first year introduced new and dramatic elements, preparing his congregation to hear the groundbreaking masterpiece he was to unveil on Good Friday in 1724: his first major Passion-Oratorio, the *St. John Passion*.

The Passion-Oratorio as a genre was by no means invented by Bach, although his Passions are the most widely known today. Musical settings of the Christian Passion story were common already in the Middle Ages, and the Passion developed

into its Lutheran form during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Martin Luther was an extraordinarily passionate music-lover, and was responsible for giving music a position of supreme importance in the Lutheran service. Luther expressed his feeling about music in his characteristically forthright way:

Music is a fair and lovely gift of God. Next to the Word of God, only music deserves to be extolled as the governess of the feeling of the human heart. This precious gift has been bestowed on men alone to remind them that they are created to praise and magnify the Lord. *He who does not find this an inexpressible miracle of the Lord is truly a clod and is not worthy to be considered a man.* (my italics)

In Bach's time, Passions were composed by most of the leading musicians, including Telemann and Handel. And yet, their Passions have never made the impact on listeners that Bach's have. Bach's profound spiritual depth rings through his music in a way that transcends the compositions of his contemporaries.

The Passion form, as it had evolved by Bach's time, was an oratorio intended as part of the Good Friday worship service. A sermon would have taken place between Parts 1 and 2 (but you may be pleased to know that we are giving you an Intermission instead). The music consists of recitatives narrating the Passion story verbatim from the Bible – in this case the Gospel of John – interspersed with arias and chorales set to contemporary (18<sup>th</sup>-century) religious poetry, reflecting on the Biblical passage just heard. Thus, sacred texts are interlaced with contemporary, more directly emotional material that speaks to the listeners in a universal way. (In fact, this concept has served as my own inspiration in creating two spiritual crossover programs for Apollo's Fire: *Sacrum Mysterium – A Celtic Christmas Vespers* and *Sephardic Journey – Wanderings of the Spanish Jews*.)

In Bach's Passions, the Biblical narration is performed by “the Evangelist” (i.e. St. John), while the dialogue spoken by Jesus, Peter, and Pilate is set as recitatives for solo singers stepping out of the chorus. Dialogue spoken by various groups of Chief Priests, crowds, etc., is sung by the chorus. A Bach Passion alternates between “action scenes” (where the Biblical story is relayed by the Evangelist-narrator and the characters), and contemplative arias and chorales (where we step outside of the story to reflect on the lessons to be learned as people of God). In our performance, I have tried to highlight the structure by placing the action scenes in the hands of true singing actors, who emerge in special spots on the stage to embody their roles.

It is not known for certain who compiled the 18<sup>th</sup>-century text that serves as the basis of the arias and chorales (as well as the opening chorus “Lord, our Master” and the closing chorus “Rest well”) in the *St. John Passion*, but it is quite possible that Bach did this himself. In any case, most of the text is drawn from the widely-used Passion text by Heinrich Brockes, which was also set by Handel and Telemann. It is noteworthy, however, that Bach made significant changes in the text to remove anti-Semitic passages. (The Brockes text essentially blames the Jews for Jesus' crucifixion, whereas Bach's *St. John Passion* text clearly places the guilt on each of us as sinners. This was also Luther's view.) Since anti-Semitism was, unfortunately, a socially acceptable phenomenon in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, I conclude that Bach made these changes not out of fear of controversy, but rather out of a desire to create a Passion on a higher spiritual level.

The *St. John Passion* is the work of a 39-year old man and is filled with the extroverted emotions and daring of a great composer still in experimentation with this genre. This is a strikingly compressed telling of the Passion story; unlike the *St. Matthew Passion*, which luxuriates in an expansive and contemplative meditation on the Passion tale, *St. John* plunges us into a dramatic whirlwind of events from the very first recitative. This leads to a much more intense experience of the Crucifixion, in which the music serves as a counterpoint to the action. Particularly striking is the way in which the most tragic events are associated with triumphant music, such as the middle section of *Es ist vollbracht* (It is fulfilled), in which Christ is portrayed as a hero in battle. If the *St. Matthew* is the Passion of grandeur, *St. John* is the Passion with passion.

From the first swirling notes of the orchestral introduction, it is clear that Bach is taking us closer to opera than any of his church-music colleagues had dared to tread. The turbulent accompaniment paints a vivid picture of the events that are about to unfold. As with an operatic overture, we are drawn into the drama: the relentless, pulsating bass-line, like a beating heart, sets the stage for passion and terror. The surging motion in the violins evokes the chaos of the mob we will soon meet. And above it all, the long and anguished calls of the flutes and oboes lock in painful dissonances, like lost souls calling to each other from Hell. - Or, as John Eliot Gardiner suggests, nails being driven into flesh.

This introduction builds up to the entrance of the chorus, which arrives with a surprising twist. Instead of the words of lamentation which the music has led us to expect – and which an 18<sup>th</sup>-century audience expected to hear in the Passions of the time – Bach gives us a song of praise to the universal reign of Christ: “O Lord, our Master, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” Thus Bach boldly breaks the baroque rule of *Affekt*, which normally decrees that each movement of a piece will have one particular emotional character. Instead, as Gardiner says, we have two *Affekts* simultaneously - Christ’s glory and majesty are proclaimed, while Christ himself is looking down on the maelstrom of distressed humanity below. This stark duality runs through the Gospel of John: light and darkness, good and evil, truth and falsehood. Christ lifts up his cross in glory and draws all mankind to him – and yet he is also brought to the lowest of physical abasement, for the sake of humanity.

From there unfolds a drama of an intense and often mystical nature. I see the work as falling into seven Scenes (though they are not indicated by Bach) – two in the first half and five after intermission. Each scene propels the story forward and concludes with a reflective aria in which a singer steps out of the story to contemplate what we as the people of the God can learn from this scene.

Bach’s use of the instruments at his disposal is colorful and often pungent. Plaintive oboes describe the shackles of our bondage to sin. Lighthearted flutes illustrate how Simon Peter (and all of us) follows Jesus with faithful footsteps. The full orchestra participates in the outcry of remorse at the end of Part 1, when Peter is filled with anguish for having denied his Savior. A lonely and haunting viola da gamba – a relatively rare guest in Bach’s orchestra – depicts Jesus’ battle with death in the famous *Es ist vollbracht*. And the other-worldly combination of flute and *oboe da caccia* accompanies the evening’s one true lament, *Zerflesse mein herz* (“Dissolve in tears, my heart”).

It is an honor for those of us onstage to take this spiritual journey each evening. Our company of artists (including people of many faiths, as well as agnostics) feel privileged to share Bach’s masterpiece with audiences in this tour and as we record the work this week for CD/DVD release next year. Our wish is that our concert halls and church venues will ring with Bach’s message of hope and redemption.

### III. THE TEXT

#### The Gospel of John – Text for a Mystical and Passionate Passion

Bach chose the most “difficult” and mystical of the four Gospels – the *Gospel According to St. John* – for his first Passion. This is the Gospel that begins with the famous prologue, “In the beginning was the Word [Logos, cosmic reason], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it.” (John 1:1, 4-5)

Chapter 21 of John’s Gospel states that this account is the eyewitness testimony of “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” The “beloved disciple” was traditionally thought to be the Apostle John – one of the Twelve Apostles. John’s personal and emotional responses to the unfolding events color Bach’s Passion throughout. The “beloved disciple” – that is, the Evangelist who is narrating our story – witnesses Jesus’ interrogation by the High Priest; speaks privately to the doorkeeper in order to get his comrade Peter into the palace; and is then shocked by Peter’s denial of Jesus, horrified by the behavior of the mob at the trial before the Roman governor (Pilatus or Pontius Pilate), and appalled when they demand to free a common murderer rather than freeing Jesus. John’s double role as narrator and character culminates when Jesus, in his final hour, gives his mother into the care of the “beloved disciple who was standing by.” In our production, this is the moment when the Evangelist breaks out of his narrator role to look directly at his beloved Teacher, dying on the cross – and we feel the profound love between them.

Though modern scholarship holds that the Gospel of John was written by several people, in Bach’s time it was still believed that the Apostle John was the author. Bach chose to end the final recitative of the *St John Passion* with John’s statement about the purpose of his book: “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing, you may have life in his name.” Yes, John was an Evangelist.

The book of John arose in a Jewish Christian community in the process of breaking from the Jewish synagogue. It regularly describes Jesus' opponents simply as "the Jews." In later centuries, the book was unfortunately used to support anti-Semitic polemics. However, it is important to understand that the author(s) of the gospel regarded himself/themselves as Jews, championed Jesus and his followers as Jews, and probably wrote for a largely Jewish community.

#### IV. THE SOURCES

Bach performed the *St. John Passion* four times during his life – 1724, 1725, about 1730, and some time in the late 1740's. For each performance he made changes to the score; thus there is no definitive version. In the fourth performance, however, he returned primarily to the original 1724 version. Since this seems to have been his final view of the work, this is the version we are performing, with a couple of minor exceptions. (We have retained the colorful *violas d'amore* from the original version of No. 19 and 20; and we use the more flamboyant 1725 version of the No. 33 "veil of the temple" recitative, since Bach seems to have abandoned it merely to appease the ecclesiastic authorities.) The two scholarly editions of this work, the *Bach Gesellschaft* and the *Neue Bach Ausgabe*, differ in their interpretation of many ambivalences in the surviving performing parts, especially in the interpretation of slurs which are notoriously unclear in Bach's manuscripts. Rather than choosing one edition as sole authority over the other, I have considered both and have made artistic choices with the goals of musical coherence and faithfulness to Bach's surviving manuscript material.

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