

ST. MATTHEW PASSION PROGRAM

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

(1685-1750)

St. Matthew Passion

Although J. S. Bach is surely one of the finest composers that ever lived, his contemporaries regarded him as just a competent organist.

In 1723 he was appointed civic music director of Leipzig and Cantor at St. Thomas' Church, but he was not the first choice. Other candidates had declined the offer, leading one town council member to remark, "Since the best man could not be obtained, lesser ones would have to be accepted."

In addition to being in charge of all musical activities under the town council's supervision, Bach was responsible for the music (which meant he composed most of it!) at four large Lutheran churches, as well as instruction during the week at the St. Thomas boys' school. Despite these demanding duties, the cares of a large family, and endless squabbles with city, school, and church officials who accorded him little respect, the composer stayed in this position for the rest of his life.

Bach must have found immense professional and personal satisfaction at St. Thomas, for the Cantor position was one of the most prestigious posts in Germany. At that time Leipzig was a flourishing commercial center and university town of 25,000 inhabitants, and Bach was confident his new position would offer a superior education for his sons and economic stability for his family. Then, too, he must have realized he could draw on a wide array of resources—the town's professional musicians, university students, and boys from the St. Thomas School—for any large-scale work he would compose.

In addition to providing music for ordinary services, Bach wrote for special occasions, such as services during Holy Week, including Passion settings. Originating in the late Middle Ages as a means of dramatizing biblical events for the laity, these sacred dramas were musical settings of the events

leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and they were traditionally performed on Good Friday as part of the vesper service.

At first the Passion settings were very simple, using only the Gospel accounts, with an introductory and concluding chorus. Over the years, though, the text was expanded to include non-biblical words.

By the 17th century, Passion settings were especially popular in Germany. Bach wrote several Passion settings, but only two have remained intact, with *St. Matthew Passion* considered to be the finer one. The text comes from chapters 26 and 27 of the Gospel According to St. Matthew, and also includes additional verses by the Leipzig poet Christian Friedrich Henrici, often known by his pen name Picander.

The work is scored for organ, SATB soloists, two choruses, each with its own orchestra comprising strings, flutes, and oboes, but no brass or timpani. Today's performance will differ slightly from the initial one. The *oboes da caccia* will be replaced by English horns, and women will perform as soloists and members of the chorus. During Bach's time social standards did not permit women to sing in any church choirs. All of Bach's choristers were probably students from the St. Thomas' School, which had an approximate enrollment of 60 boys, ranging in age from 12 to 23. Auditions for St. Thomas were highly competitive, and after years of rigorous training by Bach, choir members were undoubtedly prepared to perform any difficult composition. During the 18th century boys' voices typically changed around the age of 17 or 18, and there must have been an ample number of young boys who could easily sing the extremely demanding soprano parts of *St. Matthew Passion*. The alto and tenor parts were sung by boys whose voices had already changed. It is likely that many of Bach's former students who still lived in Leipzig—those who sang in the Collegium Musicum or were university students—were added for the lower parts, especially the bass.

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St. Matthew Passion divides into two principal parts. The first one opens with a choral lament about impending events and tells the story leading up to Jesus' betrayal and arrest. The second half includes Peter's denial, and Jesus' trial, judgment, and crucifixion, ending with another choral lament. Despite the prevailing sense of tragedy and somber conclusion, the overall effect is one of contemplation and gentleness, not despair. Performance time is approximately 3½ hours, and Bach wisely placed the homily between the two main sections. Churchgoers seemed not to have minded the length of the service, since Sunday Lutheran worship often lasted from 7 a.m. until noon!

Like an oratorio, *St. Matthew Passion* is a mixture of recitatives, arias, and choruses. The recitatives (solos that somewhat resemble both speaking and singing) contain dialogue, provide information to the listeners, and help propel the action. Arias usually reflect on the action in the preceding recitative or express an emotional quality, and choruses comment on events of the story or sometimes participate in the action.

What sets Bach apart from his contemporaries is the manner in which he treats these elements and synthesizes various styles of his day. He entrusts the most important recitatives to the Evangelist, who narrates the story, while members of the chorus portray other "characters" in the drama, such as the disciples, Jesus, and Pontius Pilate. All the recitatives are accompanied only by a simple continuo (organ and a sustaining bass string) or continuo with a small number of additional instruments. However, Jesus' recitatives are always accompanied by strings, providing what some scholars describe as "a lush halo."

Bach offers touching moments of symbolism, as in the soprano aria, "Bleed Now, Lovely Heart," which beautifully prepares the listeners for the sacrifice that Jesus will make. As the soloist sings of the blood

of Christ, light staccatos and descending two-note phrases in the flutes and strings symbolically portray drops of blood.

Although Bach never wrote an opera, he was affected by the dramatic and emotional qualities of this genre. One notable example is the brief but deeply expressive alto recitative, *Ah, Golgatha!*, which is sung as Jesus is dying. The choruses often provide devotional commentary, but they, too, have dramatic moments in which they participate in the action. When Pontius Pilate asks which criminal should be freed, the chorus, representing the crowd, shouts Barabbas, and referring to Jesus, they angrily demand *Let Him be crucified*. Another remarkable instance of Bach's dramatic flair occurs in the continuo's sudden scale-like passages of 32nd notes, which depict the rending of the veil in the Temple. Despite Italianate influence, Bach never completely abandons the German polyphonic tradition. Extensive imitation or fugal writing frequently occurs within the voice parts of a single choir or between the two choruses.

One of Martin Luther's unyielding tenets was that congregations should participate in the service in their own language, hence the use of German instead of Latin and the development of chorales (simple hymn tunes). While it was common for Lutheran composers to insert chorales into Passion settings, Bach does this to a greater extent than most of his contemporaries. Nine different chorale tunes appear at salient points of the narrative, often after a choral commentary or recitative, and Bach employs one of the most famous chorale tunes, *O Sacred Head Now Wounded*, five times throughout the work. Some of the chorale tunes are presented in fantasias or as a *cantus firmus* (chorale melody accompanied by numerous counterpoints in other voices). However, most of the them appear in poignant four-part harmonizations to emphasize significant words. During Bach's time the tunes and words were well known, and everyone undoubtedly sang

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these melodies together. Through their formal participation in this commentary on the drama, members of the congregation were drawn into it, and thus one of the traditional aims of all dramatic performances was magnificently achieved.

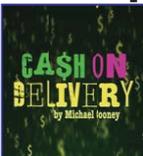
Church officials claimed the theatrical aspects of *St. Matthew Passion* made it inappropriate for a religious setting, but Bach must have believed otherwise. He prepared a lavish calligraphic score of the composition, replete with inks of different colors, to preserve it at a time when most music, including his, was composed for specific occasions, to be used and thereafter discarded. That fair copy eventually passed into the possession of a choral director in Berlin, Carl Friedrich Zelter, who kept the memory of Bach's music alive. One of Zelter's pupils, Felix Mendelssohn, discovered the manuscript and conducted a performance of *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829, a little over a century after its first performance in Leipzig. The event sparked a revival of interest in J. S. Bach that has never abated. *St. Matthew*

Passion is now universally regarded as one of the most monumental masterpieces of all time, an unparalleled delineation of all the emotions engendered by the crucifixion and the events leading up to it. Today practically everyone has heard of J. S. Bach. No one remembers the names of his critics.

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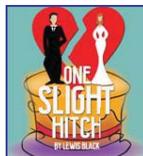
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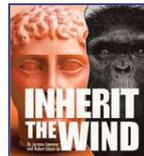
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