

A Listening Guide to J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*

My personal relationship with the *St. Matthew Passion*

From my 20s onward, I have considered the *St. Matthew Passion* one of the great achievements of classical music. I had the privilege of singing in the chorus for two sets of performances of *St. Matthew Passion* with Harry Christophers and the Handel + Haydn Society of Boston in 2012 and 2015. Being able to be a part of actually making this music come alive with a group of world-class musicians in Boston Symphony Hall is without a doubt one of the highlights of my career.

The best way to experience this piece is in one sitting, with a break between the two parts. I find it tremendously helpful to have the text and translation in front of me in order to keep focused, but I also close my eyes at various points now that I know the piece well. I am also very much aware that the idea of two-and-a-half hours of German Baroque singing might be intimidating or too much for some people, so I have assembled highlights from this great work along with some comments about what to listen for in the movements that I think are most important for theological, emotional, or structural reasons. If you choose to listen to the whole piece, my analyses can serve as signposts along the way.

Part I

— *No. 1: Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen*
<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4> [ca. 7 min.]

Double choir, treble choir, double orchestra. The choir sings text of Picander, the treble choir sings the chorale “O Lamm Gottes unschuldig” (O innocent Lamb of God).

The opening chorus is a solemn procession but also catches the listener in the middle of a story already in progress; a conductor I worked with said that the tempo had to be deliberate but also feel like you were stepping onto a moving conveyor. The first choir, representing the Daughters of Zion, sings “Come, you daughters, help me lament. Look!” The second choir, representing the Believers, asks “At whom?” “At the Bridegroom; (a traditional name for Jesus). See him!” “How?” “Like a lamb.” As this dialogue continues, the boys’ choir enters along with a penetrating organ stop specified by Bach, singing a chorale that arches over the busyness of the procession. They sing, “O innocent Lamb of God/ Slaughtered on the beam of the cross.”

This alternation between the two choirs continues, call-and-response style, until the words “See him bearing the wood of his own cross,” when both choirs come together to reinforce the profundity of the message, the trebles crying out “Have mercy on us, Jesus!” The beginning text is repeated, all voices ending together on “Like a lamb.”

The opening chorus is like drawing back the curtain on a play that has already started. The Evangelist then begins with Matthew 26, which begins just as Jesus is finishing a very heavy discussion with his disciples. For context, Matthew 25 includes the parable of the ten bridesmaids, the parable of the ten talents, and a section given the header, “The Judgment of the Nations” in the *New Revised Standard Version* of the *Bible*. But then Jesus gets back to more practical matters, saying that it is only two days until Passover, and that he will be turned over to the authorities to be crucified.

– No. 9: Scene “Aber am ersten Tage der süßen Brot...” (includes Herr, bin ich’s?)

– No. 10: Chorale “Ich bin’s, ich sollte büßen”

– No. 11: Scene “Er antworte und sprach...” (includes the Last Supper)

<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=1287> [ca. 4.5 min.]

This scene is from Matthew 26:17-22, a chorale, and then Matthew 26:23-29, and it shows how skillfully Bach changes textures as well as containing the example of alternating Biblical text and chorale text. Jesus says that one of the disciples will betray him. Choir II, representing the twelve disciples, asks, “Herr, bin ich’s?” (Lord, is it I?) eleven times (Judas does not speak). Then the full choir responds with the chorale “Ich bin’s, ich sollte büßen” (It is me. I alone am guilty) after which the Biblical narrative continues. Remarkably, the shifts from narration to choir to narration to choir to chorale take just two-and-a-half minutes. The subsequent narration – with an arioso for Jesus as he sings the words used during the consecration of Communion: “Take, eat, this is my body” and “This is my blood of the New Covenant which is shed for the remission of sins” – takes only another two-and-a-half minutes. Bach is both able to take long stretches to contemplate, and to get through a lot of plot quickly and effectively. Note that when Jesus speaks, he is surrounded by a “halo” of strings where the Evangelist gets just organ and ‘cello.

– No. 19: *O Schmerz!*

– No. 20: *Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen*

<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=2148> [ca. 7 min.]

Here we have some commentary text in the typical Baroque form of recitative and aria, only the tenor solo from Choir I alternates with responses from Choir II. For context, Jesus has just gone into the garden of Gethsemane with Peter and the Zebedee twins (Matthew 26:37-38) and has told them to stay awake and watch with him.

Bach indulges in some word painting here. The tenor declares, “O Schmerz! Hier zittert das gequälte Herz” (O agony! Here trembles the afflicted heart) and the bass line is in repeated sixteenth notes, representing the rapid pulse. After each two lines of tenor solo, the other choir responds that all of this suffering is happening because of their sins.

The aria proceeds in much the same way. To the accompaniment of solo oboe and bass instruments, the tenor sings “I will stay awake by Jesus.” The choir replies “So all our sins will fall asleep.” This juxtaposition implies that this Passion is bitter and sweet at the same time.

– No. 27: *So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen/Sind Blitze, sind Donner in Wolken verschwunden?*

<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=3166> [ca. 5.5 min.]

Jesus has just been arrested by the Romans, and much in the same manner as the previously-discussed tenor aria, there follows a duet between soprano and alto soloists of Choir I (with flutes and oboes, the violins and violas serving as a “walking bass” but higher than ‘cello would comfortably play) lamenting the capture of Jesus, while Choir II shouts, “Let him go, stop, do not bind him!” in vain. Out of this beautiful lyric duet there erupts a violent double chorus: “Have lightning and thunder vanished in clouds?” The vivid depiction of a storm alternates between the two choirs with increasing speed until at the end they are flinging single words back and forth about “that false-hearted traitor of murderous blood” referring to Judas.

– No. 29: *Chorale: O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß*

<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=3601> [ca. 6 min.]

The first half ends with a highly ornamented chorale. The disciples have just fled in fear, and the jumping sixteenth notes in the flutes and oboes depict their delicate but deliberate footsteps. Unlike the opening chorus, this one unites all of the forces into one large choir, including the trebles who join with the sopranos to reinforce the melody. For a text that says “O mankind, bewail your great sin” the music is unexpectedly upbeat. The chorale tune would definitely have been known by Bach’s audience though with such an elaborate setting it is unlikely that they would have been able to sing along.

Take a break here. Have a snack and some water, take a little walk. The second part is longer and more intense.

Part II

– No. 34: *Mein Jesus schweigt, zu falschen Lügen stille.*

– No. 35: *Geduld! Wenn mich falsche Zungen stechen*

<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=4326> [ca. 5 min.]

The High Priest has just asked Jesus to respond to the false witnesses’ testimony that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Jesus, however, says nothing. With short chords from the winds, the tenor restates the Biblical text: “My Jesus is silent to false lies” going on to say that should we find ourselves in a similar situation, we should be like him.

The aria brings in the viola da gamba for the first time. This instrument was already outdated, having enjoyed considerable popularity during the Renaissance. It has a fairly nasal, cutting tone, more so than the ‘cello, and a crisp articulation. The bow is also held underhand unlike the other string instruments. The text is: “Patience! When false tongues stab me” and Bach underscores the first word with longer, smooth notes, and then quick jabbing dotted rhythms under the second part.

– No. 38: *Scene of Peter’s three denials*

– No. 39: *Erbarme dich*

<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=4774> [ca. 9 min.]

Peter sits in the courtyard of the palace. He is approached by a maid who says that he was with Jesus of Galilee, which Peter denies, before heading out of the courtyard. But before he can leave, a second maid also says that he was with Jesus, something Peter denies again but more forcefully. Not long after this, the entirety of Choir II says “You are one of them, we can tell by your speech” to which Peter responds with curses and declares emphatically that he does not know Jesus. Then the cock crows and Peter remembers that Jesus had told him: “before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” Peter then weeps bitterly, with a tortured vocal line in the Evangelist’s narration.

A solo alto sings “Have mercy, my God, for the sake of my tears.” This is one of the most exquisite arias, with a slow *pizzicato* accompaniment in the ‘cello and bass, sustained chords in the upper strings, and a solo violin duetting with the voice. A great singer can truly make you feel the teardrops and the begging for mercy.

- No. 47: *Der Landpfleger sagte*
 - No. 48: *Er hat uns allen wohlgetan*
 - No. 49: *Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben*
- <http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=5992> [ca. 6.5 min.]

In the middle of the violent frenzy of the crowd demanding that Barabbas be set free and Jesus be crucified, Pontius Pilate asks “what evil has he done?” (Matthew 27:23). Rather than continue with the Biblical narrative, a solo soprano answers:

He has done good for all of us,
The blind he has given sight,
The lame he made to walk...
...otherwise my Jesus has done nothing.

The soprano soloist is accompanied by organ, ‘cello, and two oboes da caccia, which are large oboes at the same pitch as modern English horns but with a large flared bell that points back and gives them a gentle, covered sound. Then she sings an aria that reflects to me the central message of the entire work:

Out of love, my Savior wants to die,
Though He knows nothing of sin.
So that eternal ruin and the punishment of judgment
Would not remain upon my soul.

The bass instruments drop out, leaving just the two oboes da caccia and a solo flute with the soprano. If a modern composer were to give an aria such an accompaniment today, we would call it innovative and revolutionary, but Bach did this nearly three hundred years ago! The oboes have an almost vocally expressive quality to their sound and the flute floats far above, an oasis of calm which makes the ensuing repetition of the *turba* chorus “Laß ihn kreuzigen!” (Let him be crucified!) ring out in stark contrast.

- No. 54: *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*
- <http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=7026> [ca. 2 min.]

This chorale, sung by both choirs and accompanied by both orchestras, is still sung in the same harmonization in churches all over the world during Holy Week. The melody is called “Passion Chorale” and the English is usually “O Sacred head, sore wounded.” The German text is by Paul Gerhardt (1607–1676) after a poem attributed to either Arnulf of Leuven or Bernard of Clairvaux, one a medieval sacred poet and the other a Cistercian abbot. As for the music, its likely origin may be surprising. It is generally agreed upon that it comes from a very secular song by Hans Leo Hassler, written around 1600. Far from being about the suffering of Jesus on the cross, its title is “Mein Gmüth ist mir verwirret” which means “My mind is confused” and the cause is having seen a beautiful young woman. Paul Simon’s “American Tune” is also based on the same melody.

– No. 61: *Scene of Jesus' death*

– No. 62: *Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden*

<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=8071> [ca. 3.5 min.]

Jesus is on the Cross, and while it is not yet night, it is dark. (Matthew 27:45) For the only time in the piece, he sings without his halo of string accompaniment as he asks, in Aramaic: “Eli, Eli, lama asabthani?” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He loses his halo because in that moment he expresses pure humanity; even he thinks that God has left him. Half the crowd misinterprets the “Eli” for “Elijah” and says that he is calling for the prophet Elijah. The other half says, “Let us see if Elijah will come to help him” but then Jesus cries out and, in King James’ poetic English “yields up the ghost.”

The chorale that follows is the same melody as No. 54, only it is the ninth and penultimate stanza of the Passion Chorale text. Bach specifies the usual orchestral accompaniment, but most conductors opt to have the choirs sing it without instruments, or perhaps with a soft organ only, *pianissimo*. It is hard for our modern ears to hear just how chromatic and tortured this harmonization is since we have heard Stravinsky and Bartók, but for Bach it is truly remarkable. When I sang it, the conductor told us to whisper it in the dawning realization that something cataclysmic has just happened.

– No. 64: *Am Abend, da es kühle war*

– No. 65: *Mache dich, mein Herze, rein*

<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=8412> [ca. 8 min.]

Joseph of Arimathea has asked Pilate for Jesus’ body, which he receives (Matthew 27:57). A solo baritone, over wandering strings, sets the scene: “In the evening, when it was cool, we felt Adam’s Fall. In the evening, the dove came back with an olive branch in its mouth (a reference to the story of Noah’s flood). Jesus’ body comes to rest, let us always remember.”

There follows one of the most difficult arias for a baritone voice to sing, not because of its technical demands, but because of its extreme emotional content. “Make yourself pure, my heart, for I wish to bury Jesus myself.” This is an aria during which I have heard fellow singers whisper “I don’t believe these words myself, but I’m still crying” and this sentiment is not unique.

On April 30th of 1870, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote “This week I heard the divine Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* three times, and on each occasion, I had the same feeling of utmost astonishment. Someone who has completely forgotten Christianity actually hears it as if it were one of the gospels.” Easter was on April 17th that year, so he must have heard it two weeks prior to his letter, but nitpicking aside, we must remember that this is the same philosopher who declares that “God is dead.” Eighteen years later he wrote a postcard from Paris declaring his seemingly pleased shock that the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* had devoted an entire page to printing the complete score to the aria “*Erbarme dich*,” in French translation of course. The context is not given, but the page of *Le Figaro* can be seen here in a scan from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2804042/f8.item>

– No. 68: *Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder*
<http://youtu.be/rt-mhLJl3A4?t=9134> [ca. 5 min.]

The *Passion* concludes with a c minor chorus of profound lamenting. “We sit down with tears and call to you in the grave: rest in peace.” Bach is very exacting with his dynamic markings, which is very rare; usually he gives only *p* (for *piano*, softly) and *f* (for *forte*, loudly). But here he gives degrees of softness: *p*, *più p* (softer), and *pianissimo* (very soft). The choirs call “rest well” and “sweetest rest” back and forth to each other, and the movement closes in darkness.

Bach, of course, does not let us stay in the darkness very long, for on Easter Sunday he gives us cantatas with fanfares of trumpets and timpani like BWV 11: “Der Himmel lacht! Die Erde jubilieret!” (Heaven smiles, Earth rejoices” proclaiming the joy of the Resurrection, or the more solemn text of Martin Luther in BWV 4: “Christ lag in Todesbanden” (Christ lay in the bonds of death) which sounds like a Passion text but the third line says that “He has risen again and brought us life; therefore we should rejoice.” Each of the seven verses ends with that four-syllable “H” word that we will be glad to say again in just a few days’ time.

The recording linked to throughout is conducted by Sir John Eliot Gardiner. It features the Monteverdi Choir and the English Baroque Soloists, and was recorded in 1988 on Archiv with the following soloists:

Anthony Rolfe Johnson, tenor (Evangelist)
Andreas Schmidt, baritone (Jesus)
Barbara Bonney, soprano (Arias and Pilate’s wife)
Ann Monoyios, soprano (Arias)
Ruth Holton, soprano (First Maid)
Gill Ross, soprano (Second Maid)
Anne Sofie von Otter, mezzo-soprano (Arias)
Michael Chance, countertenor (Arias, First Witness)
Howard Crook, tenor (Arias, Second Witness)
Olaf Bär, baritone (Arias, Pilate, Peter, High Priest I)
Cornelius Hauptmann, bass (Arias, Judas, High Priest II)

Notes on the background and context of J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*

The Forces

St. Matthew Passion is unique in Bach's output in that it requires a double choir *and* a double orchestra. Several of his motets, the "Osanna" from the *b minor Mass*, and a couple of cantatas specify a divided choir, but no other work has multiple groups of instruments. As for the voices, it has been argued that Bach wrote *St. Matthew Passion* for only nine singers: soprano, alto, tenor, bass in each group, and an extra *soprano in ripieno* for the chorale in the first movement and to reinforce the top line in the closing movement of the first part. While this is possible and has been demonstrated on a few recordings, it is more likely that Bach's intentions were for small choirs of both voices and instruments, which is how it is usually done today. However, back in the first half of the 20th century, when symphony orchestras and choral societies performed Bach passions, they used enormous forces numbering in the hundreds. There are portions of the piece where this can be very effective, but to keep such a large group together, some of the tempi have to be much slower than we are used to now. Otto Klemperer's recording from 1960, for instance, takes nearly four hours where John Eliot Gardiner's from 1988 takes a little over two-and-a-half hours using fewer than half the people.

Ideally, there would be at least eight soloists, four from each choir. Originally the soloists would have sung in the choir as well but now it is more typical for them to only sing the arias and other solo portions.

The part of the Evangelist, who sings most of the Biblical text, is for tenor. He sings almost entirely in a style of heightened speech-rhythm singing called *secco recitative*, accompanied by organ and a bass instrument (usually 'cello). The part of Jesus is for a bass or baritone, and he sings in a similar style but accompanied by a "halo" of strings. There are individual solo parts for Peter, Judas, the High Priest, Pontius Pilate, his wife, two false witnesses, two maids, and two priests or Pharisees. So that these are not always the same voices, these parts are often sung by members of the choir.

Each orchestra is made up of violins, viola, two flutes, two oboes, and a *continuo* group consisting of organ and bass instruments: 'cello, bass, and bassoon. In addition, a Renaissance instrument called the viola da gamba (literally "viola of the leg") is used in a couple of movements. This instrument is similar in size to the 'cello, but it has seven strings and is fretted like a guitar. It probably would have been played by one of the 'cellists.

The Texts

There are three main sources of text for *St. Matthew Passion*. The first is the Gospel according to Matthew, specifically chapters 26 and 27. Because Bach was employed by the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, an important Lutheran church, this is in German in Martin Luther's own translation. Bach's personal copy of the Luther Bible survives, complete with marginalia and a few modifications to the text, but for the most part it is faithful to what Luther translated himself. The Biblical text is sung by the Evangelist, Jesus, the lesser characters stated above, and occasionally by the choirs when they represent the crowds, which are referred to by the Latin *turba* in a musical context.

The second source for the text is chorale texts along with their associated melodies. Similar to verses of modern hymns, a couple of these are still used in modern worship. They come from a generation or two before Bach and would have been familiar to his congregation, who might have sung along with them as a modern church sings hymns with the choir.

The third source is poetic theological commentary, called “madrigal text” which was written by Christian Friedrich Henrici, who used the pen name Picander. This was a way of inserting Lutheran theology of the time into the Passion (or regular Sunday cantatas) and it makes up all of the solo arias in the work. Because all three sets of text are in German, they flow seamlessly into each other. An example of the texts joining is found in No. 9 above, when Jesus says that one of the disciples will betray him. This example is particularly relevant because it demonstrates a popular theological idea of the time called the Theory of Satisfaction, where in order to enjoy the benefits of salvation and forgiveness of sins, the believer has to admit their own complicity in Jesus’ suffering and death. One movement (“Sind Blitze, sind Donner” which is No. 27) has text from Heinrich Brockes Passion of 1712, the Handel and Telemann settings of which Bach is known to have performed in Leipzig.

The Music

Though we put him on a very high pedestal today, in his own time Bach was criticized for using forms that were already considered antique in the 1720s. Nevertheless, despite his lack of formal innovation in sacred music, he does things within these fairly rigid forms that are extremely effective emotionally. These were examined in the notes that accompany the individual movements.

The Service

Bach’s Passions were performed at Vespers on Good Friday in Leipzig, alternating annually between the Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche. The service was a long one; between the two halves of the Passion a sermon of about an hour’s length would have been preached as well as a reading of the text upon which the sermon was being preached. There were also four congregational hymns and a choral motet of one of the traditional Tenebrae responses for Good Friday. The service ended with the singing of the hymn “Nun danket alle Gott” (Now thank we all our God). Bach’s Passions are between two and three hours of music, the sermon an hour, with at least another half hour of readings and hymns; these were not short services by any stretch of the imagination!

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