

**10**

**First Passion**

*What passion cannot Music raise and quell?*

– John Dryden, ‘A Song for St Cecilia’s Day’ (1687)

The house lights are dimmed, the conductor enters the pit, the orchestra is poised to begin. There is that unique mood of expectancy you find only in a darkened theatre at the beginning of an opera before the music starts to weave its particular magic and the drama to unfold. No opera overture of the first half of the eighteenth century that I know comes closer to anticipating the moods of those to *Idomeneo* or *Don Giovanni* than the opening of Bach’s *John Passion*; nor is there a better direct ancestor to Beethoven’s three preludes to *Leonore*. For pictorial vividness and tragic vision, the turbulent orchestral introduction is without parallel. Like a true overture, it beckons us into the drama – not in a theatre, but in a church or, nowadays, often in a concert hall. The tonality – G minor – is one that from Purcell to Mozart usually implies lamentation. The relentless tremulant pulsation generated by the reiterated bass line, the persistent sighing figure in the violas and the swirling motion in the violins so suggestive of turmoil, even of the physical surging of a crowd – all contribute to its unique pathos. Over this ferment, pairs of oboes and flutes locked in lyrical dialogue but with anguished dissonances enact a very different kind of physicality, one that can create a harrowing portrayal of nails being driven into bare flesh.

So far one could interpret this as a highly charged representation of the Crucifixion, one in which each of these motivic elements seems to call attention both to itself and to the way it impinges on all the others. But then the bass line, static for its first nine bars, begins to move downwards chromatically, and the music starts to well up and intensify. (Three years later Handel will do something similar, though to vastly different expressive ends, for the coronation of George II – in the monumental build-up to the first choral entry of ‘Zadok the Priest’.) With the entry of the chorus something of unprecedented, shocking power occurs: in place of

words of lamentation Bach introduces a song of praise to the universal reign of Christ, ‘O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth’ (Psalm 8),<sup>a</sup> a unique occurrence in Passion settings of the time.<sup>1</sup> The voices enter together in three isolated stabs: *Herr! ... Herr! ... Herr!* The impression of a dual *Affekt* could hardly be clearer: an evocation and portrayal of Christ in majesty like some colossal Byzantine mosaic, but one who is looking down on the maelstrom of distressed unregenerate humanity below. Bach has found a way of matching the stark duality of ideas so often cultivated by John: light versus darkness, good against evil, spirit and flesh, truth and falsehood. In the course of this movement we soon realise that the duality takes the form of a vertical section – between the Godlike Christ ‘lifted up’ on the Cross and drawing all men to him – and his abasement, ‘brought low’ for the sake of humankind. Jesus’ majesty is thus proclaimed, as one Pietist contemporary of Bach’s put it, ‘behind the curtain of his sufferings’.<sup>2</sup>

There was a time, not far distant, when public familiarity with Bach’s church music was confined to the canon of his three most substantial chorale works: the *B minor Mass*, the *Christmas Oratorio* and the *Matthew Passion*. Bolder choral societies might tackle his Latin *Magnificat* now and again (in spite of being chorally one of the most technically demanding of all Bach’s works), yet strangely would pass over the *John Passion*, perhaps assuming it to be little more than a rough draft for Bach’s ‘Great’ Passion. Ever since Mendelssohn’s hugely acclaimed restitution of the *Matthew Passion* in 1829, *that* became the work, practically definitive of Bach’s genius, to command universal respect bordering on awe. Next to it the shorter *John Passion*, though also revived by Mendelssohn in 1833, tended for long to be regarded as its poor relation – cruder, less finely honed and essentially ‘far inferior to the *St Matthew*’, according to Philipp Spitta, the first in a line of Bach specialists who considered that ‘as a whole it displays a certain murky monotony and vague mistiness’.<sup>3</sup> Not to Robert Schumann, however. After conducting the *John Passion* in Düsseldorf in 1851, Schumann found it ‘in many ways more daring, forceful and poetic’ than the *Matthew*: ‘How compact and genial throughout, especially in the choruses,’ he

exclaimed, ‘and of what art!’<sup>4</sup> It would take until the second half of the twentieth century before Schumann’s enthusiasm for the earlier work –‘one of the most profound and perfected works of Bach’ – began to prevail and some sort of parity between the two Passion settings started to emerge.<sup>b</sup>

I am convinced that Schumann was right. Far from being dwarfed by its epic companion piece, the *John Passion* is the more radical of Bach’s surviving Passion settings. Indeed, it packs a more powerful dramatic punch than any Passion setting before or since, an impression strengthened by its greater popularity and frequency of performance in the late twentieth century. Given a storyline so intrinsically strong and so familiar, Bach may instinctively have gauged that his listeners would be susceptible to the proven devices of fiction. He uses suspense and the satisfying arc of traditional narrative, including conflict, crisis and resolution, and sustains it at a pitch of musico-theatrical intensity beyond that of any opera score of the period. To make his narrative as vivid as possible, Bach is perfectly happy to rifle through the conventions of representation that opera had been developing for the past century, and now formalised in his day. The cast-list includes clear-cut villains, a hero-cum-martyr, and secondary characters either likeable but flawed (such as Simon Peter) or merely flawed (Pontius Pilate); and yet, emphatically, it is not an opera. Its conventions and its purposes are not those of the opera house, nor did Bach ever imagine for a second that it could be performed with theatrical apparatus and accoutrements. It is as bold and complex an amalgam of storytelling and meditation, religion and politics, music and theology, as there has ever been, and a climactic manifestation of that ‘spirit of music-drama’ whose emergence we traced in [Chapter 4](#). And since he is not catering for a ‘passive’ opera-theatre audience but rather a Lutheran congregation eager for spiritual nourishment, Bach can count on a degree of active participation from his listeners as they find themselves inexorably drawn into the fabric of the drama. This allows him to set tough questions for them.

Avoiding any glib ‘operatic’ characterisation of his biblical cast, Bach instead encourages individual singers and players of his

ensemble to step forward at given points – to voice their thoughts, prayers and emotions as contemporary witnesses to the re-telling of Christ’s Passion (and in his own performances even to swap roles). This was an experimental way of creating a fresh experience for his listeners, one outwardly geared to their spiritual edification but unprecedented in its dramatic intensity. What must have been so shocking to Bach’s first listeners was that all this was heard and being played out in *church*. It is entirely possible that such a unique fusion of music, exegesis and drama might have perplexed its original biblically saturated listeners, just as much as it seems guaranteed to pass over the heads of an often biblically disabled modern audience, who do, nonetheless, still find it so gripping. We need to find reasons why a music so theologically impregnated and so fixed in what looks like a parochial version of Lutheran Christianity seems to ‘slip its historical moorings’<sup>5</sup> to reach out and enthral audiences in so many different parts of the world almost 300 years after its inception. This, in turn, is the place to look for the renewal and expansion of the principles that inspired the founding fathers of opera, Monteverdi principal among them, whose central objective was to harness music’s powers to move the passions of their listeners.



We saw how, from the outset of his cantorate in Leipzig, Bach had set himself the herculean task of composing (as far as conditions and time allowed) new music each week for all the festivals in the church year, his initial target (most likely) a minimum of three annual cantata cycles, each with a Passion setting as its climax. Accordingly, the *John Passion* was to become his first major ‘planet’ encircled by its co-orbital ‘moons’ – the cantatas he had fashioned so far in his first season. To re-approach it through familiarity with the cantatas that surround it, even nearly three centuries after its creation, changes and enriches our experience of it as performers or

as listeners: it emerges as a work in which Bach crystallised ideas and techniques he had systematically been developing over the preceding year – different ways of combining choruses, chorales, recitatives and arias, of alternating the action of the narrative with the contemplative, and balancing vivid, dramatic scene-setting with stretches of the most beautiful and persuasive exposition of its meaning for the listener. Judging by the regularity with which he revived it in later years in the face of what seems to have been adverse criticism by the consistory and attendant pressure to alter its tone and theological slant, Bach must have attached a high value to it. It was his largest-scale work to date, one comprising forty separate movements and lasting over one hundred minutes, greatly exceeding any liturgical needs or directives, and one of a small selection of works that would occupy his thoughts at intervals for the rest of his career. It is significant that for two last performances in the year of his death and one the year before, he reverted in all essentials to its original state.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this was his way of seeing that justice was done to the exceptional artistic effort he had expended in planning and shaping one of the most elaborate designs of any of his major works.

We referred in [Chapter 9](#) to the unstoppable creative flow of his first year in Leipzig, the subtle and resourceful means he found to reflect and adumbrate the theological themes particular to each church feast, the cantatas thematically linked by twos and threes (and in once case six) to provide continuity and coherence from week to week. We saw him give an unseasonal theological twist to two successive Christmas-time cantatas (BWV 40 and 64), in which he played down the Nativity story and instead gave a persuasively Johannine view of the Incarnation as God's descent in human form to save man and to bring joy through his defeat of the Devil – in clear anticipation of the message of the *John Passion*. To the same end, in his choice of cantata texts and in his selection of chorales in the period leading up to Lent, Bach carefully prepared his listeners for the communal response which the chorales were soon to fulfil in his first Passion setting. He had even given them a foretaste of what

type of music they could expect of him when faced with an extended passage of Scripture and with his imagination fired by a particularly dramatic incident such as Matthew's description of Jesus' calming a violent storm on the sea of Galilee (BWV 81), as we saw in the previous chapter.

As they assembled in the Nikolaikirche on that Good Friday afternoon, the congregation must therefore have had a pretty good idea about the kind of music that was in store. They had had almost a year in which to become accustomed to a style of music which Bach himself later freely admitted to the authorities was 'incomparably harder and more intricate' than any other music performed at the time. Now, for the first time in his cantorate, and with the spoken elements of the liturgy shrunk to a minimum in the Good Friday service, his music could legitimately occupy the centre-stage and constitute what Telemann once described (of his own cantata cycles) as a veritable 'harmonious divine service' in itself. Here was his opportunity to show on a large canvas what sort of input modern music – *his* music – could have in defining and strengthening Christian belief. None of his peers, and certainly none of his predecessors, had ambitions for exegetical music of an equivalent complexity or scale. None could match the depth of his elaborately patterned music – his meshing of narrative and reflection, of scriptural chronicles and theologically shaped poetic texts. In a university city famed for its theological faculty, it was a courageous – some might have called it a brazen – statement, coming as it did from someone who was not a theologian and who did not even have a university degree.

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 and singing of a Passion chorale in which the whole congregation joined. And then the mass of instruments fell to again. When this Passion music was performed for the first time – with twelve stringed instruments, many oboes, bassoons and other instruments

– many people were shocked 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, singing 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 one another and said, ‘What will come of this?’ An old widow of the nobility said, ‘God save us my children! It’s just as if one were present at an Opera comedy.’ But everyone was genuinely displeased by it and voiced many just complaints against it. There are, it is true, some people who take pleasure in such idle things, especially if they are of sanguine temperament and inclined to sensual pleasure. Such persons defend large-scale church compositions as best they may, and hold others to be crotchety and of melancholy temperament – as if they alone possessed the Wisdom of Solomon and others had no understanding.<sup>7</sup>

While some scholars have suggested that this account by the Lutheran theologian Christian Gerber referred to an event in Dresden rather than Leipzig, it nonetheless voices what may have been a typical reaction to Bach’s presentation of his *John Passion* in the Nikolaikirche on Good Friday 1724. Leipzig, in the early decades of the eighteenth century, was a conservative environment where political and religious life was conditioned by tradition and precedent. Its citizens might have grown accustomed to having their own opera house – and for the city fathers this was living proof of their cultural open-mindedness at the three annual trade fairs. But ‘operatic’ Passion music in church was quite another matter. Merely by setting it as concerted or figural music, Bach was straying into a potential minefield. In the absence of any direct testimony, Gerber’s is the best account we have to help us gauge the public response to Bach’s first Passion – or at least that of his more vigilant and pious listeners. The presiding clergy, too, may have been disconcerted, ever alert to the danger of music stealing their thunder, disturbing their congregation’s Good Friday meditations and threatening to swamp the liturgy altogether. In the relations between church authorities and musicians there was (and usually still is) always an element of suspicion.<sup>c</sup> As the musical climax of his first year in Leipzig, the Passion carried with it the certainty of impact and the likelihood of a drastic ruffling of feathers.

How could it have been otherwise? While there were identifiable local traditions and preferences for marking the anniversary of Christ's Passion in different communities throughout the German-speaking world, and even from one part of a town to another, ultimately this was a personal matter in which one man's meat was another's poison – though some kind of meditation on the Passion was essential for the devout Lutheran.<sup>1</sup> In Leipzig a rich theological symbolism operated within the liturgy of its two main churches, which in turn had an impact on the choice of texts and on the way music for Good Friday was assembled, presented and received. The sermon and the musical Passion-setting, whether monophonic or figural, were different but complementary means of fixing people's attention on particular moments in the unfolding of the story – an aural Lutheran equivalent to the Catholic Stations of the Cross. For some, the very act of congregational hymn-singing was cathartic and sufficient to guide their thoughts, while others may have welcomed the experience of a vivid musical re-enactment of the Passion story to put them in the appropriate devotional frame of mind (not least, perhaps, because the hallowed tradition of the medieval Mystery Play, though rejected by Luther, still cast a long shadow). No doubt there was considerable variety between these two extremes, even before taking into account the style and complexity of the musical realisation.

Opinions about the role of music in church had probably been divided for at least a generation before Bach's arrival in Leipzig, a factor guaranteed to stoke any resistance to the novelty of his musical and religious thought. Georg Philipp Telemann had a lot to answer for in this regard. We have already traced his mirific musical activities as a student and noted how during his four years in the city (1701–5) he refused to let them be curbed by the town's arbitrary divisions and structures. This legacy continued to disturb the tranquil surface of the town's musical life long after he had left – his innovations deplored by some and welcomed as overdue by others. Leipzig's pretensions to elevated cultural status as a university city could not disguise its innate conservatism and provinciality. It seems, for example, to have been largely impervious

to the vigorous attempts by north German composers over the past hundred years to transplant Italian recitative style – and all that went with it in terms of boldness of harmony and a vivid delivery of the text, as we saw in [Chapter 2](#) – into German soil. The systems that Telemann had put in place at the Neukirche continued to siphon off the best students and freelance musicians in town years after his departure in 1705.<sup>e</sup> The church also acted as a magnet to the more progressively minded communicants, causing ripples of disapproval and envy among those who continued to worship in one of the two main city churches. Here was exactly the type of competition to put the ageing and defensive-minded Thomascantor, Bach's predecessor Johann Kuhnau, on his mettle.



Meanwhile, the new figurative style of Passion music was being ushered in, not in Leipzig, but in Hamburg in Holy Week 1712, when Barthold Heinrich Brockes invited 500 guests to his large town house for a performance of his own poetic Passion meditation, *Der für die Sünde der Welt gemarterte und sterbende Jesus* (*Jesus, martyred and dying for the sins of the world*) – set to music by the city's opera director, Reinhold Kaiser. Four years later Telemann, by now director of church music in Frankfurt, performed his own musical version of Brockes's text in the Barfüsserkirche, attended by 'several of the most famous foreign musicians [in town]'. At a further performance of this Passion setting, Telemann claimed in his autobiography, 'the church doors had to be manned by guards not to let anyone in who didn't have a printed copy of the Passion [libretto].'<sup>8</sup> Brockes's text ran to more than thirty editions between 1712 and 1722; at the height of its fame Johann Mattheson arranged for four consecutive performances in Hamburg during Holy Week 1719 in settings by Keiser, Handel, Telemann and himself. Ostensibly this was for the edification of the city's pious intelligentsia, but in reality it was an excuse for a public contest in

concert form between these rival composers – the kind of spectator sport eighteenth-century Germans could not resist. Brockes's particular brand of mawkish religiosity was just what many of its citizens wanted for their spiritual nourishment. By providing a series of pre-set reactions and responses to the story, he took away the effort of having to imagine or reconstruct the events of Christ's Passion in the mind's eye. Yet the cloying imagery of its verses was all that it took to whip up a gushing response.<sup>f</sup> Again, the court preacher at Gotha helps us to understand the attraction: 'The Passion, movingly presented and sung on Good Friday, a day worthy of every devotion, takes us every year into the open court rooms in which the just God pronounces the blood-judgement on his beloved and obedient Son, for our sins, and lets it be executed, which Mary and John, standing contritely and faithfully at the accursed wood [i.e., Cross] ... never could bear to hear. The same, then, also without doubt, will be done this year, on this day, by those who love God.'<sup>g</sup>

Could the Leipzig pastors have written in this vein? It seems unlikely. If we were to take an overview of what was on offer at Passontide, say, in 1717, we would find that at the Thomaskirche, the age-old rituals still prevail, deemed adequate to the needs of the more traditionally minded parishioners. Here, in time-honoured fashion at the morning service, the Thomaner are quietly delivering the responsorial setting of the *John Passion* traditionally attributed to Luther's musical adviser, Johann Walter.<sup>g</sup> The congregation, we note, remain standing all through the performance and are ready to return to church a second time for afternoon Vespers: with astonishing stamina and piety, they sing all twenty-three stanzas of Sebald Heyden's Passontide hymn 'O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß' or the twenty-four verses of Paul Stockmann's hymn 'Jesu, Leiden, Pein und Tod'. On the other side of town, at the Neukirche, a figural Passion oratorio with instrumental accompaniment is being performed for the first time in the city's history: Telemann's setting of Brockes's Passion. Telemann's enduring reputation and the lure of highly approachable music may account for the exceptionally large congregation, for 'the people would surely not have arrived at

church so early and in such numbers for the sake of the preacher', according to the young theology student Gottfried Ephraim Scheibel: 'I was amazed at how attentively people listened and how devoutly they sang along. The moving music contributed most to this. Although the service lasted over four hours, everyone stayed until it was finished.'<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, several miles to the west of Leipzig, in the castle church at Gotha, none other than J. S. Bach himself, travelling from Weimar to deputise for the indisposed resident court composer, is leading a performance of up-to-the-minute Passion music. Neither the music nor the text has been recovered; but other Passion settings from the next few years provide us with a clue to the tastes then prevalent at the court of the Duke of Saxe-Gotha and at similar courts throughout Germany.<sup>h</sup> In 1719 a versified meditation on the Passion said to be by Reinhard Keiser to a libretto by Christian Hunold was performed at Gotha, and in 1725 the new Capellmeister, Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel, presented his setting of a Passion oratorio, again in Brockes's version. Hunold and Brockes share a similar linguistic style – physically explicit, garish and saccharine by turns – corresponding to a type of non-liturgical devotional literature in vogue at ducal courts and in cosmopolitan cities such as Hamburg. Through their drastically realistic descriptions of Christ's torture, and passages of calm exposition alternating with bursts of outrage by the disciples, they aimed to enlist the deepest sympathies of the listener.<sup>11</sup> How far Bach went down this road in his Gotha Passion of 1717 (if 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 *John Passion* in 1725 (see below).

It was not until 1721 that Bach's future patron, Burgomaster Gottfried Lange, having taken stock of the popularity of the Telemann/Brockes Passion oratorio and the way this resulted in lower attendances at the Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche, finally succeeded in persuading the consistory to give in and to authorise the performance of figural music there at Good Friday Vespers, though they still insisted that the morning service stayed as

it had always been. The Thomascantor, Johann Kuhnau, now frail, held out against the new fashion almost to the end, though he then allegedly ‘very much wanted to perform the Passion story in figural style’.<sup>12</sup> Only a fragment of his *Mark Passion* has survived<sup>i</sup> – not enough to judge whether it was a genuine endeavour to regain the initiative or merely bowing to pressure and fashion. Its disappearance also deprives us of an immediate comparison with which to gauge the degree of continuity or novelty represented by the first appearance of Bach’s *John Passion* in Leipzig three years later. Still, Kuhnau provided Bach with a precedent for a Leipzig Passion that relied on unadulterated biblical narrative as its core, and, apparently, punctuated by 200-year-old chorales, several *turbae* and arias set to new texts of lyrical commentary.<sup>j</sup>

What is clear from this brief survey is that all across the German Lutheran world an appetite had grown for Passion meditations in music in a variety of forms during the early decades of the eighteenth century. For sections of the clergy, the musical innovations in Holy Week were cautiously welcomed in so far that ‘devotion … must always be renewed, animated, and as it were, fanned, otherwise sleep will be the sequel.’<sup>13</sup> Introducing Stölzel’s setting of Brockes’s Passion in 1725, 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 now among them.’<sup>14</sup> And that was surely the point: new music was now being attached to texts in which the Passion story was paraphrased and retold in lurid terms, with periodic eruptions of communal outrage and protest – a kind of heckling by the contemporary witnesses – built into the narration. Against this was a whole swathe of conservative opinion opposed to the theatricality of the Passion oratorio and to attempts to draw the listener in as a fictional witness to Jesus’ suffering and passion. ‘There is no edification to be hoped for here,’ complained Georg Bronner, ‘other than that the ears are somewhat tickled by the music.’<sup>15</sup>

Even in the early stages of the *Aufklärung*, Lutheran Christianity was very much alive, informing and influencing the patterns of thought of the overwhelming majority of German citizens of Bach’s

day, as we saw in [Chapter 2](#). It is a measure of an era inching its way towards modernity that, despite the shattering scientific discoveries of the previous century, faith was solid and moving in parallel – at least during Bach’s lifetime. Clearly there were good opportunities for composers to meet this demand, just as in the previous century there had been for painters positioned either side of the denominational divide. The key figures then, of course, were Rubens and Rembrandt, similar in the way that each took advantage of the continuing preoccupation with faith in their choice of subject matter, yet separated by an aesthetic and denominational divide. Furthermore, whereas Rubens’s preoccupations were centred on the human body – its sensual physical musculature and tactility, Rembrandt was intent on exploring the inner emotional and spiritual temperature and the essential humanity of his subjects. To press the analogy with German theological scripts of the early eighteenth century may be going a step too far – not least because Brockes’s audience were solid Lutherans, not Counter-Reformation zealots. One cannot overlook the fact that musicians as much as painters were held in contempt by the more conservative wings of religious opinion – and here the distaste shown by Lutherans of Pietist bent to music linked to Brockes’s inflammatory imagery is strikingly similar to the Dutch Calvinists’ disgust at the opulent fleshiness and gratuitous physicality of Rubens and his school. It was not the gushing texts alone that were offensive to the Pietists – how could it be since they themselves were lampooned by the Orthodox for their mawkish religiosity? – but rather their combination with musical settings featuring elaborate instrumentation. In an earlier age Erasmus had urged, ‘let us give up this business of wailing ... unless we do it on account of our sins, not His wounds. We should rather be joyfully proclaiming His triumph’ – but not everyone paid attention to him.[16k](#)



It is obvious that, like so much of the greatest Western painting and music of the last millennium, Bach's *John Passion* was conceived not just as a work of religious art but as an act of worship in itself. How else are we to explain the extraordinary seriousness and devout sense of purpose that it exudes? The sheer conviction of Bach's vision, its vivid particularity, inspired by John's eyewitness account of the Passion story, is thus apparent from the very beginning in the choral prologue, 'Herr, unser Herrscher', which seems to sweep all before it. Even approaching it from the vantage point of the preceding church cantatas with their astonishing array of distinctive opening movements, each of which seems to portend the essence of the ensuing work, this grand tableau is unprecedented both in scale and in *Affekt*. In common with the prologues to two later works, the *Matthew Passion* and the *B minor Mass*, the opening bars carry within them the seeds of the entire work. As a conductor, one senses that the inexorable unfolding of the successive narrative and contemplative movements of the work is predicated upon – or at least implicit in – 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 it may have in pulling the listener into active participation in the performance and widening the terms of reference beyond the pre-existing meanings and connotations that Bach may have intended for it. The *da capo* structure that Bach adopts is no mere formality or structured conceit, as so often in contemporary opera: it is a metaphor for the entire Passion story in miniature. In the A section we are shown Christ glorified as part of the Godhead ('Glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was', John 17:5). The B section then refers to his abasement and anticipates the way he is destined to lay down his life for mankind. Finally, the reprise of the A section serves to mark Christ's return to his Father in glory and majesty (Jesus prayed earlier that his disciples 'may behold my glory, which thou hast given me', John 17:24).<sup>1</sup>

This is just the first in a series of structural devices Bach puts in place to articulate and complement the structure of John's account.

Theologians have drawn attention to John's way of inscribing a pendulum-like curve for Christ's presence here 'below' in the world. Beginning at the point of its downward swing with his Incarnation, it reaches its nadir with the Crucifixion, which is itself the start of the final 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 – and also to go beyond it. As we shall see, at the midpoint Bach places his longest aria, 'Erwäge' (No. 20), which evokes the rainbow, the symbol of the ancient covenant between God and Noah after the flood. In so doing, he inscribes a symmetrical arc to match the pendulum swing of Christ's presence on earth to form an ellipse (see Plate 20).

In Chapter 14 of his Gospel, 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 re-telling of John's eyewitness account of Christ's Passion, staying utterly faithful to the New Testament – not paraphrased, as with Brockes or Hunold – inserting only two short passages from Matthew's Gospel account, and then punctuating the narration with spiritual commentary by means of ariosos, arias and chorales, the last serving as a vehicle for moments for collective contemplation.

John's account is stretched over three 'acts'. Act I (John 18:1–27) opens with the arrest and interrogation of Jesus at dead of night in the Sanhedrin court and comes to a head with Peter's denial. Act II (18: 28–40 to 19: 1–16) then deals with the Roman trial in seven scenes on a split stage: the Jewish clergy and the mob outside the Praetorium, Jesus within and Pilate hovering from one to the other. It culminates with the passing of the death sentence. In Act III (19:17–42) the action shifts to Golgotha for Jesus' Crucifixion, death and burial. With a sermon to accommodate at some point, it looks at first glance as though Bach intends to replicate John's tripartite structure by placing it at the end of John's Act I – his Part I, closing with the crowing of the cock in a verse from Matthew (26:75) which he interpolates to voice Peter's remorse and bitter weeping. Thereafter, as we shall see, the act or scene divisions are far less

clear, and the structural complications begin to pile up – hotly debated between theologians and musicologists. This is the result of Bach's design for Part II of his Passion operating on two levels simultaneously: on a literal or historical level, which obliges him to replicate John's physical narration; and on a spiritual or metaphysical level, which allows him the scope for a more abstract design in which to draw theological meaning from the events.<sup>17</sup> While there are no rigid divisions demarking either level, there are numerous correspondences between movements that suggest geometric patterns encasing a symmetrically arranged core. The musical ordering of what has been described as Bach's ‘symbolic’ trial<sup>18</sup> is slightly out of sync with the narrative divisions and changes of locale, and favours the spiritual dimension that Bach, in following John, seeks to extrapolate for the attentive listener.

For this most crucial day in the liturgical year, then, Bach evolves a structure with a subtle balance between the narrative and the contemplative, which only one composer seems previously to have attempted. Long attributed to Reinhard Keiser, this *Mark Passion* (1707) was the Passion oratorio Bach knew best, and so exceptionally ‘modern’ that he and an assistant copied and performed it in Weimar in 1712.<sup>m</sup> Following its lead, Bach establishes a triple alternation of utterance between Evangelist, Jesus, the minor characters and the crowd. The sheer pace and intensity of Bach’s narration, which of course telescopes the actual timeframe of its historical occurrence, seems fast at times, but never breathless, let alone perfunctory. Prompted by the almost spoken, declamatory style of Keiser, Bach’s is always poised to rise to moments of a far more persuasive lyricism.<sup>n</sup> Though his listeners would by now have been familiar with Bach’s recitative style from hearing his cantatas over the past nine months, here the narrative fluency and dramatic vehemence of the Evangelist’s line, tied to the fluctuating, harmonic tension between voice line and supporting continuo (and so different, too, from the ‘holy’ spoken tones habitually adopted by preachers), would have come as a surprise. Kuhnau’s Passion cannot have been anything like this. Bach was not merely filling Kuhnau’s shoes, or even those of the fashionable

Telemann: his style of story-telling in music was immeasurably stronger and musically richer than theirs.

For years I was struck by the way Bach seems to show an instinctive feel for knowing exactly when to interrupt the narrative and slow the pace down, when to intercalate solo arias in order to attach personal relevance to the unravelling of events, and when to insert ‘public’ chorales in which his listeners could voice (or hear voiced) their collective response. 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.<sup>19</sup> But it now seems that Bach had a useful guide close to hand, a commentary on John’s Passion account in the form of ten lectures given by the Pietist theologian August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) and published in 1716.<sup>20</sup> Francke’s commentary reveals unmistakable co-occurrences: in the structural paragraphing, and in the placing and thematic content of Bach’s meditative insertions. So, for example, in Bach’s Part I, we can see how

- The first theme of Francke’s opening lecture is the same *Herrlichkeit* – Jesus’ divinity – we have already noted in Bach’s opening chorus.
- This, in turn, derives from his love for the Father and for mankind in general, mirrored in Bach’s placement of his first chorale, ‘O große Lieb’ / ‘O great love’ (No. 3).
- Francke points to the moment that Jesus, when offered the chance to avert the course of the Passion, rebukes Peter for using his sword and accepts his ‘cup’ of suffering; Bach responds with his second chorale, ‘Dein Will gescheh’ / ‘Thy will be done’ (No. 5).
- Francke chooses to round out his first lecture at the point where Caiaphas advised the Jews that it would be good that one man should be put to death for the people, stressing the benefits of Christ’s voluntary self-sacrifice for humanity: not in a literal but in a spiritual sense, to accentuate the opposition between

Caiaphas's evil intent and God's goodness. Bach inserts his first and very personal aria, 'Von den Stricken' (No. 7), at this juncture – a description of Jesus being bound 'with the ropes of my sin' in order to 'unbind me' and 'to heal me fully'.

- Francke urges the believer to emulate Peter in his eagerness to follow the master; Bach adopts the same very positive tone in his first major key movement, the soprano aria 'Ich folge dir gleichfalls' (No. 9).
- In the scene where Jesus is dishonoured in the High Priest's courtroom, Francke insists on his innocence and exhorts the listener to reflect on his own guilt. In perfect synchronism Bach places the chorale 'Wer hat dich so geschlagen' (No. 11) here to voice in successive verses, first, the believer's bewilderment at Jesus' mistreatment and then his or her implication in the process: 'I, I and my sins, which are as the grains of sand on the seashore, they have caused you the sorrow that strikes you and the grievous host of pain.'
- With Peter's denial and tortured self-reproach, Francke urges the need for individual penitence, a theme poignantly and vehemently expressed in Bach's explosive aria 'Ach, mein Sinn' (No. 13).

What is so striking is that Bach, in assimilating many of the themes outlined by this Pietist theologian, took such great care in structuring his first Passion, rooting it in the strong dramatic opposition between the vengeful mob and the serenity of the prisoner Jesus, whose eventual triumph is manifest in the lifting up of the Cross on to which he was nailed. The interpenetration and sheer depth of Bach's fusion of theology and music is there for all to see and hear. Indeed, one explanation for the overwhelming impression that Bach's music can make on the listener is, paradoxically, due to the unemotional, 'pure' theology of John's narrative account. Today, from our less theologically nuanced perspective, it seems incomprehensible that there should have been any qualms about the theological complexion of Bach's *John Passion*.

More troubling in our post-Holocaust world is the demonising of the Jews in both Passions that is sometimes laid at Bach's door. Yet traces of anti-Semitism, utterly deplorable per se, are an integral part of the Gospel accounts: they are not attributable to Bach, and his Passion is noticeably free of the egregiously anti-Jewish reflections to be found in Brockes's text as set by other leading German composers of the time.<sup>21</sup> As in all heroic myth the presence of evil malefactors is a dramatic device, providing the essential background to justify (or at least facilitate) the emergence of the hero, or, in the case of the Passion story, the Saviour of humankind. Bach was setting to music a version of events intrinsic to the Lutheran tradition – certainly not to be condoned, but no different in essence from the demonising of the Egyptians in the Book of Exodus, as portrayed by Handel in his oratorio *Israel in Egypt* (or of the Babylonians as portrayed by Verdi in *Nabucco*). One could object even more strongly to the targeting of the Papists and Turks in Bach's settings of Luther's litany, as in BWV 18, since they were not part of hallowed Scripture, but gratuitous topical demons – the sworn enemies of Luther's Reformation – whom Bach chose to treat with a degree of humour, almost as pantomime villains.

This leaves us with the question, how could Bach's graphic characterisation of a bloodthirsty mob in the Gospel account, lumped together as *die Jüden*, coexist in his Passions with heartfelt expressions of Lutheran piety? The answer lies in the explicit admission of collective guilt in the contrite response of Christians in the chorales, symbolised by Bach's requiring identical singers to double as the frenzied mob and the community of the faithful. That the very persecutors of Christ from whom we recoil with outrage and disgust are *us* makes the experience of his Passions all the more emotionally harrowing. For this very reason, when I conduct these choruses, while respecting Bach's stylised forms (fugue, sequence and the use of imitation and *figura corta*, etc.), I do not hold back in drawing out expressions of the utmost self-importance, legalistic point-scoring and sheer blood-thirstiness from the *turbae*; nor in bringing to the surface the overwhelming sense of remorse and self-

incrimination in the following chorales. Heard in close succession, they mirror both reprehensible human patterns of behaviour and our horror-struck response to them, which, as Bach so poignantly reveals, often go hand in hand – one generation of out-and-out victims becoming, with tragic irony, the next generation’s perpetrators of similar atrocities.

So, after the action-filled narration and, in particular, the unremitting interventions of a deranged mob, the chorales stand out as islands of musical sanity – and indeed that may have been the way Bach himself viewed them. As everyone familiar with either of Bach’s surviving Passions knows, 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 – pulling the action into the here and now, confirming, responding to or repudiating what has just happened in the narrative, and obliging one to consider its significance. Even if the consensus among today’s scholars is that they were not intended to be sung congregationally, the chorales certainly provided a cultural framework and moments for the contemporary listener to make instantaneous connections between the unfurling of biblical events and the reassuring recognition of familiar verses and melodies which were accepted as the most direct forms of address between the believer and his God. Their tunes are solidly crafted and peculiarly satisfying in their regular paragraphing. Marvellously lucid, Bach’s harmonisation lifts the often humdrum words of the hymn-writer on to a higher level, giving equal emphasis to depth of feeling and humanity. It is fruitless trying to separate out their harmonic richness from the exquisite shaping of all three lower lines, each one a credible melody in its own right.<sup>o</sup> The intersection of these vertical and horizontal planes is crucial – in the earliest etymological sense of the word – to one’s experience of them.



Equally important to the articulation of John's Passion account is Bach's strategic placing of his arias. At key moments they draw together the threads of the underlying doctrinal significance, establishing an active engagement with the listener yet without diminishing the inexorable unfolding of the drama. Bach has sometimes been criticised by twentieth-century commentators for placing the first two arias of Part I cheek by jowl (with only three bars of recitative between them); but this is to misunderstand his purpose. Here is one of several occasions when we sense his creative impulses, in this case producing a contrasting diptych taking its lead from Francke's reflections and working to convey successive images: in the alto aria, Jesus, newly fettered and manacled, his bonds serving to 'unbind' and free man from the 'bonds of sin'; and in the soprano aria, the contrite believer hurrying to follow him – to the ends of the world if necessary, or at least as far as the High Priest's courtroom. In the first case he seizes on the punning references to bondage – 'to free me from the *bond* of my sin, my Saviour is *bound*' – and in this opening ritornello motif he devises a subtle braiding of the two oboe lines to symbolise the 'bonds' in what Germans call the *gebundener*, or 'bound', style: a falling, perfect fifth (second oboe) answered in canon by a diminished, or 'diabolical', fifth (first oboe), Christ's 'bond' – willingly endured for man's 'bonds of sin' and – piling on the symbolism – 'tied' over the bar-lines. Bach's instruments in the second aria are a pair of transverse flutes, who engage in canonic exchanges with the soprano.<sup>P</sup> A single flute might have given a breathless credibility to the love-chase, but with two players sharing the same part and thus able to alternate, or 'stagger', their breathing to ensure an unbroken line, the impression of a spinning- (perhaps prayer-) wheel is more pronounced. The effect is strengthened by Bach's use of a palpitating melismatic descent for the word *ziehen* (a reference to the Crucifixion – 'when I am lifted up I will *draw* all men to me'). At all events the success of this entrancing piece – a *passepied* in  $B_8^3$  major – is to convey the eager innocence of willing participation and companionship. It makes the ensuing account of Peter's fall all the more poignant. 'Ich folge dir' is very much in a Bachian genre of naive, faithful, trusting, even

blissful soprano arias, often the last number of a cantata before the final chorale.

John's eyewitness account of Jesus' appearance before the High Priest Caiaphas has the flavour of a tense courtroom drama (the more significant Roman trial follows in Part II). Aggression and suspicion are in the air – the prisoner in the dock, the self-possession and reason of his answers enough to infuriate his accusers. That this is a kangaroo court is clear from the gratuitous blow to Jesus' face by the High Priest's servant: as John Drury observes, it is 'all he can do by way of reaction to him'. The narrative never slackens its pace, though the recitation moves in and out of third-person reportage and emotionally charged lyricism. The drama of a sideshow at the back of the courtroom is equally gripping: Peter ushered in by John, the narrator – a case of discreet string-pulling – is recognised and identified as an accessory after the fact. As the accusations grow nastier, Peter's laconic denials become progressively more emphatic.<sup>q</sup>

Bach brings things to a head by means of a gossipy fugal chorus – in his world, it seems, even busybodies conversed in fugues – ending with a shouted homophonic taunt. We can almost see their gargoyle-like profiles inches away from Peter's face, akin to those Flemish and German paintings of the Renaissance, especially by Matthias Grünewald. Inevitably we suffer with Peter; but the uncomfortable question Bach asks us to consider is, would any of us have emerged from his ordeal with greater credit? The tension in the courtroom mounts with the glance that Jesus gives Peter at the moment when the cock crows.<sup>r</sup> And then, by inserting Matthew's account of Peter's weeping at this point, Bach abandons all objectivity with a momentary shift in both the perspective and the identity of its narrator. For Peter, the pain of betrayal and the reminder that he is not the 'special loved one' are excruciating. Bach constructs a melisma that changes key every two beats and never seems to stabilise, so that the distress is self-perpetuating. This is the prelude to an aria that encapsulates Peter's pain and that experienced on his behalf by John and all subsequent witnesses, even if it is not explicitly assigned to him. Up to this point Peter has

been sung by a bass. When in performance the tenor soloist who sings the Evangelist also sings the ensuing aria (which may have been Bach's intention anyway); the sense of dual identity – Peter and the Christian onlooker (*us* in other words) – is thereby intensified, especially when he refers to *die Schmerzen meiner Missetat*, 'the agonies of my misdeed'.

For those who detect only a cool cerebral control in Bach's music, this aria (No. 13, 'Ach, mein Sinn') is the perfect riposte. Bach summons all his available instruments to participate in this finale to Part I of his Passion – full of tortured self-reproach, but widened to convey Peter's lesson to all humankind and to induce in the listener 'a state of violent shock'.<sup>22</sup> What is most unusual for this expression of remorse is his choice of the French heroic style – normally associated with pomp and circumstance – and the way he fuses it with Italianate structural techniques, whereby every single bar excepting the three-bar epilogue is derived from the opening ritornello.<sup>23</sup> Three features contribute to the effect: the choice of key – F<sup>♯</sup> minor, known to the French as 'the key of the goat'; the construction of a descending chromatic bass line over which grating dissonant harmonies are elaborated; and the decision to set it as a fast chaconne. One bonus of using a French-style dance as the basis of this aria was the licence it gave Bach to vary the internal shaping of the dotted rhythms – here smoothly 'swung' in conjunct motion for lyrical passages (as in Blues singing), there sharply over-dotted for outbursts of fiery arpeggios (*wo willt du endlich hin*), the vocal phrases constantly varied in consequence, now reinforcing the characteristic second beat of the chaconne, now contradicting it by means of hemiolas bestriding the bar-line. Here, then, he has assembled all the ingredients to make an impassioned statement.<sup>s</sup> The energy and emotional temperature are high and the vocal compass is stretched to the limit: in its frenzy and self-reproach it looks forward to Beethoven's Florestan (and there is indeed proto-Romantic extravagance of imagery embedded in the text, with its references to Christ's prophesy of the day when the faithful 'shall say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us'). Implicit

beneath the turbulent surface of the music Bach has devised to convey Peter's horror at the realisation of his betrayal is the need for forgiveness. That Bach understood this perfectly is clear from the underlinings he makes at this point in his copy of Calov's Bible commentary. Calov writes, 'The highest and finest apostle, Peter, falls more shamefully than the other apostles, and yet recovers. If I were able to describe or depict Peter I would write over every hair on his head "forgiveness of sins", because he is an example of this article of faith – forgiveness of sins. This is how the Evangelists portray him, for no section of the entire Passion story is described in so many words as the fall of Peter.'<sup>24</sup>

Was coming across this in Calov the impetus for Bach to make the inspired switch from John to Matthew at this point?<sup>t</sup> The effect is not (as in so many arias in a Passion oratorio of the period and indeed in many of Bach's Passion arias) to take us reflectively out of 'real-time' – witness the way he manipulates the ritornelli to confuse our expectations of the aria's structure, where a more 'rounded' design might have seemed more settled within itself and consequently less 'implanted' in the action.

As the final bars of the tenor aria fade away – appropriately with a speeded-up recall of Peter's weeping theme and the recurrent motif used to convey his shivering at the back of the courtroom – Bach brings us gently back to earth, to our present. His choice of chorale to draw the lessons from Peter's story is both strategic and tactful: Paul Stockmann's 'Jesu, Leiden, Pein und Tod', one of the hymns most often sung by the Leipzig faithful on Good Friday, its stately melody by Vulpius marvellously soothing at this juncture (No. 14). The words refer us again to Jesus' 'serious' glance and the forgiveness of sins it offers to the contrite. With the sermon due to follow at this point, it is hard to believe that not much more than a half an hour has gone by – less than the time needed for one of Bach's double-decker cantatas, yet with so much action compressed within its timespan and music of such blistering intensity. According to Leipzig custom, the Good Friday Vespers sermon drew on the Old Testament texts that presage the Crucifixion (Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 in alternate years). But, unless the role of the sermon was

reduced to something equivalent to a ‘translation’ or the provision of subtitles, what, we might ask, was Superintendent Deyling to preach that had not already been said for him already by his cantor in music of such impassioned eloquence and persuasiveness?



After the sermon the action and the tonal shifts speed up, reinforcing the authority of the first-person voices. Once again, as in Part I, Bach shows a similar approach to that of Francke’s Passion lectures, although here the symmetrical design of his ‘symbolic trial’ does not coincide quite so neatly with Francke’s boundaries.<sup>25</sup> Chorales frame the sermon like bookends, an impression scarcely diluted by the liturgical requirement of a ‘pulpit Lied’ and organ chorales at this point. But the first chorale in Part II actually carries the narration forwards: vicariously we experience the way Jesus was ‘seized like a thief in the night ... taken before unbelievers, falsely accused, derided, spat upon and vilely mocked’. In constructing music for this central scene of Jesus before Pilate – the Roman trial – Bach traces the outline of John’s Gospel very closely. The sheer theatrical dynamism is here unprecedented. Not even the lake-storm in his cantata BWV 81, *Jesus schläft*, can match this for sustained dramatic momentum. Crucial to its effectiveness, again, is the physical deployment on an imaginary stage set: Christ as prisoner, immobile (perhaps immobilised) in the judgement hall, the crowd holding back in the outer court, ‘lest they should be defiled’, Pontius Pilate the go-between.<sup>u</sup>

The contrast between the uneasy public confrontation of the Roman governor with the mob and their spokesmen on one side, and Pilate’s attempts at man-to-man dialogue with Jesus on the other, is immensely strong. Even the subject matter is different: arguments about law, custom and political authority in the outer court, questions of a more philosophical nature (including the nature of truth itself) bandied between the two men in the

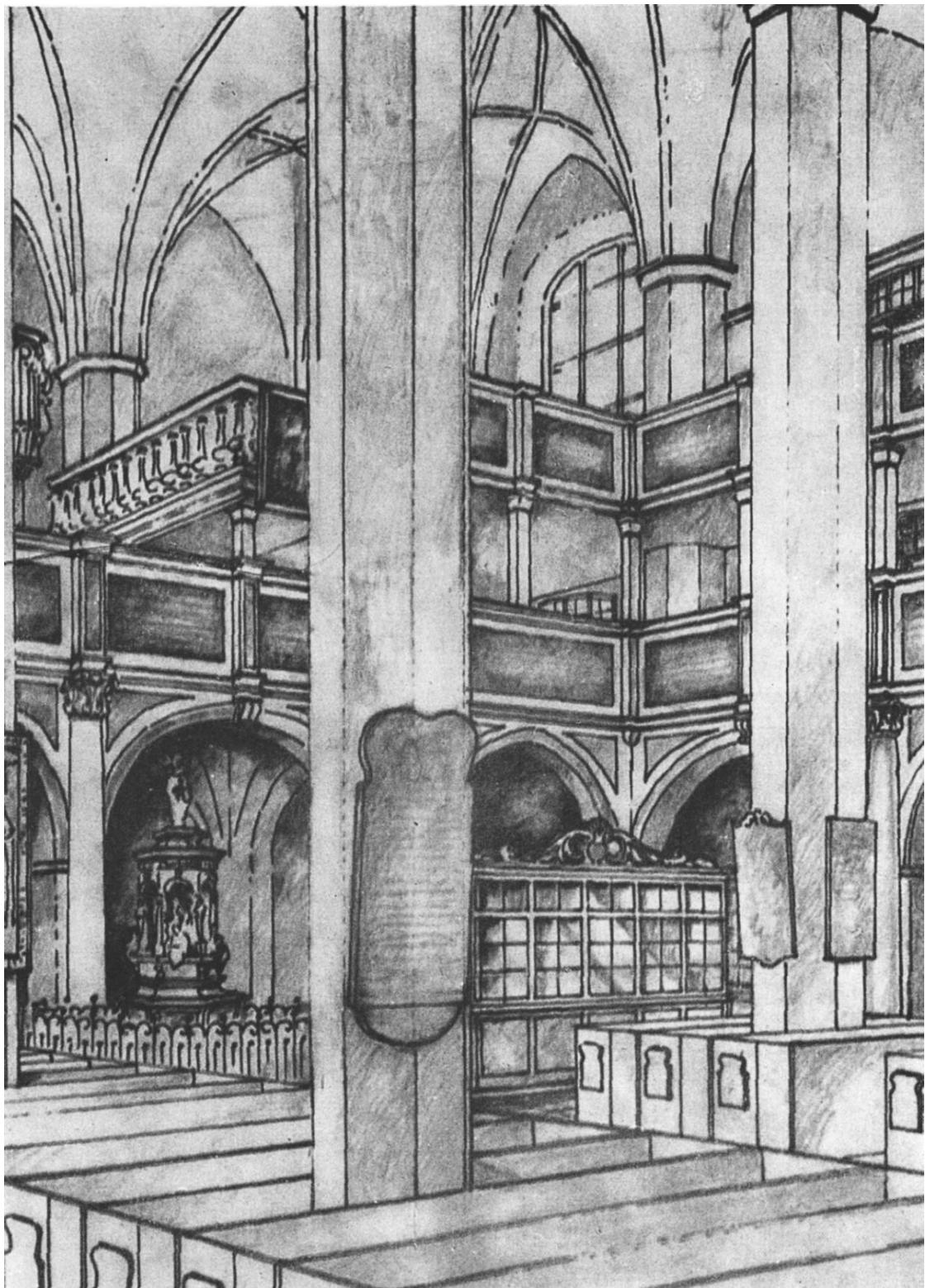
judgement hall. Underlying both is the question of identity: who exactly is Jesus? The whole Passion narrative revolves around this issue. Resolving it one way or another will determine whether Pilate will bow to mob pressure and pass the death sentence on Jesus; it will also point to the wider ramifications this has for humankind. Two opposed concepts of kingship are being debated here: the spiritual, revealed when Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world, and the secular, culminating with the crowd's rebuttal – 'We have no king but Caesar.' Once that option has been twisted and construed as opposition to the colonial power, Rome, releasing Jesus proves to be impossible. Reading and re-reading John's account of the trial scene (Chapters 18 and 19), and then living on the inside of Bach's musical exegesis over many years and performances, I cannot avoid sensing that the faith which undoubtedly supports both accounts, whether read, spoken or sung, has less to do with dogma and far more with a quest to lay bare the human condition and to find ultimate meaning in life.

In each situation Bach seems to find a vivid response and an appropriate tone – for every charge and counter-charge, accusation and riposte – and to keep a tight control of the overall pacing. Though concerned to maintain the momentum and to preserve the remorseless uncoiling of events and arguments, especially in the central trial scene, again he shows an unerring sense of when to freeze the frame, when to interpose moments for reflection and commentary and when to sum up, thereby creating space for the story to register with the listener. His aim being to extrapolate and clarify the meaning of the events of the Passion for the listener (in ways that are out of reach for the preacher), he establishes a whole network of lines, constantly checked, to connect each point in the unfolding of the dramatic action with the basic biblical data that account for it. Thus time is always moving on two planes, the present implying (as well as reacting to) the past and the past conditioning the present. Once more it is the judicious choice and placement of chorales that provide the essential scaffolding and punctuation of the narrative and that simultaneously articulate the underlying theological themes. You could of course remove them

(together with the meditative arias) and the piece would still make sense at one level; but to do so would break the circuit – obliterating the connections to Bach’s time and to ours. What was left would be equivalent to a Greek tragedy without the chorus.<sup>v</sup>

Recent commentators, lulled by the ease with which it is possible to identify the way-markers Bach leaves along his trail – the plethora of thematic links and recurrences, the progressions, cross-references and self-quotations – claim to have detected purposeful symmetrical designs underpinning Bach’s musical structure. At first their findings look promising but soon run into problems. In the first place they cannot always agree exactly where these symmetries occur in the work, and, as one might expect, Bach himself has nothing to say on this subject. Then, the singling out of one or two discernible structural patterns runs the risk of giving each a disproportionate significance – as though *it* was the most important aspect of the music.<sup>w</sup> It seems to me far more likely that Bach, in arriving at his overall design for the work, employed several organising principles at once. To pick on just one as holding the key to our understanding is to devalue the way his creative process may have operated at different levels simultaneously. Any single pattern, whether rudimentary or complex, is likely to provide a distorted and reductive view of a piece whose deeper significance is embedded in its very specificity – of text, style, grammar and, above all, of concept and intent. Indeed, Bach seems regularly to be drawing our attention away from the overall, or ‘macro’, structure and towards the highly specific, and to the particular details of text and *Affekt*. A common feature distinguishing all his major church compositions is the way they drew from him the full resources of his craft, something he valued as a sacred trust. It was his skill in identifying musical means to mirror mathematical images of God or Nature that gave Bach’s music its extraordinary force, and as a result these patterns and images are registered on our unconscious listening habits in multiple ways. But the question remains, does our awareness of them actually enrich our experience of the *John Passion* in performance?

For me their significance registers more on the retina than on the ear, more on paper than in performance.<sup>x</sup> This is distinct from, but perhaps parallel to, the clearly audible modulatory patterns which Eric Chafe has identified as dividing the work by tonal ‘ambitus’ – in nine differentiated key regions (see figure below). These he traces back to Johann David Heinichen’s concept of a *Musicalischer Circul* (1711), or circle of keys,<sup>26</sup> which ‘served as the new paradigm of tonal relationships’ just before the hugely significant emergence of twenty-four major and minor keys in Bach’s time and the well-tempered tuning ‘that made their use possible’. Chafe argues most persuasively that the successive use of the ‘ambitus’ is a deliberate device by Bach to control and organise the music of the *John Passion* on such a large canvas. Furthermore, he suggests, Bach employs it to underscore the fundamental oppositions within John’s theology; so that, for example, Jesus’ sufferings are associated with flat keys, their benefits for humankind with sharp keys:<sup>27</sup>



(illustration credit 50)

The listener's ability to 'clock' all these modulatory excursions as they progress – and as Bach would have assumed – can enrich the experience, but is not essential. Similarly, while recognising that this is what is happening in the music, we can 'enjoy' the Passion without becoming embroiled in all the paraphernalia of contemporary Lutheran theology and the way it interconnects with the formal patterns and gestures of Bach's music – or is, at times, even at odds with it. My feeling is that there is so much intrinsic human as well as musical substance here that, although Bach's incidental exegetical purpose was undoubtedly to vivify and augment his first listeners' meditation on the implications of the Gospel story, it is his music – and the inexplicable but nonetheless powerful effect it can have on us – which is always the dominant force. So replete in its unique sense of order, coherence and lyrical persuasiveness, it has proved that it can survive the passage of time and cross all boundaries, denominations or absences of belief. But, at the same time – and central to this book's argument – is the conviction that, in order to discover more about the man (as well as to deepen our understanding of the Passion itself), we need to explore beneath the surface of his music: to try to unearth the roots of its inspiration.<sup>y</sup>

Here we find, as so often in his church music, Bach is Janus-faced: glancing back as he draws inspiration and stimulus from the music he had learnt as a treble, from a time when German music was still in the first flush of excitement, playing at matching vernacular words to Italian-liberated recitative and continuo-based harmony, a time when 'Lutheran music followed the very grain of the text';<sup>28</sup> and also forward-looking in the new complexity and inventiveness of his art. Even if we accept that he took as his starting-point the groundplan of any of the Passion Histories of the previous century – by Selle, Flor, Sebastiani, Theile or Meder, or even the great Schütz (see footnote on [this page](#)) – these are not necessarily the most significant models in terms of musical materials and language that he was intent on re-working and perfecting.

For a single example one need only point to the way Bach takes over Monteverdi's *stile concitato* (his codification of ways that music

can imitate the ‘warlike’ emotions) and uses it with devastating impact both for the belligerent clamour of the *turba* and for the celebration of Christ’s immanent victory over death and the Devil in the middle section of ‘Es ist vollbracht’ (No. 30). Already in Part I we have observed his habit of constructing an opening movement of symphonic proportions that looks forward to the age of *Sturm und Drang*, that of his sons’ generation. We had a foretaste of his newly developed recitative style in the way it both reflects the most minuscule inflections of the Gospel text and creates significant frictions with it, and how the harmonic motion ‘carries the countless melodic events on its shoulders, so to speak’ while allowing Bach opportunities ‘to unpack the astonishing array of text-musical correspondences we find [here and] in virtually every work’.<sup>29</sup> We also experienced the strategic placement of the chorales.

Now, in Part II, the pace, tone and structure shift on to the bigger screen, with Jesus face to face with Pilate, who alone has the power to determine the final outcome. In this work, much more so than in the *Matthew Passion*, Pilate emerges as an intriguing and not wholly unsympathetic figure – a beleaguered provincial governor cowed by the mob, yet still demanding better evidence for the charges of sedition against Jesus. In today’s performances, especially when Pilate is well characterised, one senses that listeners are drawn to his equivocation and to the dilemma he faced, shuttling to and fro between Jesus, whom he clearly sees as innocent, and the crowd.<sup>z</sup>

Two features of the trenchant crowd choruses immediately stand out: the rising chromaticism of the four voice lines in canonic imitation, and a manic whirling figure – usually in the flutes, once in the first violins, several times in both – that attached itself to the ‘mob’ ever since they first sent a search party out to arrest Jesus in Part I. Readily identifiable, too, is an incipient dactylic figure (long-short-short) first associated with the ‘delivering up’ of Jesus to Pilate but soon to be used with obsessive insistence – first by the Evangelist to convey (harshly) the whip-lashing ordered by Pilate and then (tenderly) in the long tenor aria meditation on that scourging. This figure will soon become the motto of the two fanatical *Kreuzige* choruses; but in those its remorseless bellicosity is

welded to grinding dissonance, the product of fugal entries that have sprung out of the original oboe/flute collisions we noted in the opening chorus. The ferocity and sheer nastiness of these outbursts is chilling, especially as it reflects on us all (not just on the Jews and Romans): in Luther and Bach's view we are all *simul iustus et peccator*, both sinless and sinning, and therefore inescapably implicated in the mob frenzy and mindless brutality that saw an innocent man condemned to be crucified.

Bach finds two very different but equally compelling strategies to round out this portrayal: a sarcastic triple rhythm piece for the Roman guard ordered to stage Jesus' mock coronation (with another of those twirling-whirling figures in the woodwind suggestive of a grotesque game of Blind Man's Buff); and a pompous swaggering fugue-subject – of the kind that Handel was soon to use in his English oratorios to characterise his Old Testament baddies. Bach uses it to capture the self-righteous laying down of the secular law by the High Priest and his cronies – a clear trap for Pilate. Painters from Giotto to Hans Fries and Pieter Bruegel the Elder had found ways of bringing a vernacular realism to biblical scenes and to faces contorted by hatred. But no composer had previously come near to Bach in rendering the subtleties of irony and sarcasm with such penetrative insight. It would require a Hector Berlioz – and a hundred years of musical history – to patent a more garish portrayal of mockery and *grotesquerie* in music.

In all, there are eight choruses for the Jews and one for the Roman guard distributed across the trial scene, to which Bach added a tenth ('Sei gegrüßet'), perhaps to make a symbolic connection between the secular law and the Ten Commandments. There are variants, cross-references and repetitions aplenty. These are easy to identify and can be shaped into synoptic or symmetrical chiastic patterns almost at will. There is also an immensely significant cranking up of tonality in the course of the scene. So, for example, the flute figure identified with the pair of 'Jesus of Nazareth' choruses heard in Part I reappears on five more occasions during the trial scene, travelling upwards from G minor in Part I to a screeching B minor (the flute at the very top of its range) at its last

appearance – in the chorus ‘We have no king but Caesar’ (No. 23f). Such is the intrusive dominance of the crowd’s presence throughout this scene – peering into the judgement hall from the outside and, in effect, pulling Pilate’s strings – that we may not be conscious of what else might be going on here.

Among contemporary Bach scholars, only Chafe to my knowledge has detected the way Bach has introduced a palliative element embedded within these *turbae*. He argues that, through the association of ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ with the easily identifiable whirling flute motif, Bach is constantly inscribing Jesus’ name ‘in situations where the identity of the King of the Jews is called into question’ and attaching it to texts ‘all associated with the *denial* of Jesus’ Messianic identity by the crowd’. Next he points to the way each of the five *turbae* encompasses the full span of chords associated with the ‘ambit’ of each particular key in which they are set and finds here ‘a striking resemblance to the ancient idea of Christ as Creator-Logos binding all things together into a cosmic system, or *systema*’ (see [this page](#)). In other words Bach has hit upon a miniature harmonic formula which stands for John’s image of the incarnate Word, which he uses to reinforce the structural devices in his portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth that are hidden beneath the surface of the music. It culminates with the ironic inscription Pilate orders to be affixed to the Cross, proclaiming Jesus as King of the Jews in several languages. Finally Chafe identifies Bach’s way of threading the message of this inscription all through the central portion of the Passion by establishing a pattern of transposition with alternate rises of a fourth and falls of a third: G minor, C minor, A minor, D minor, B minor. ‘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’: ‘Jesus’ divine identity is veiled beneath its opposite.’

What we have then is, simultaneously (1) Jesus’ true identity being insistently re-emphasised by thematic association in the

memory of the listener; (2) a harmonic formula which stands for Jesus in the closed, circular ‘ambit’ inscribed within each of the successive *turbae*; and (3) what Chafe refers to as a ‘tonal allegory’ of Christ’s journey on earth, which ends with his being hoisted up on the Cross, his victory emblazoned by the royal inscription. It is as though Bach, faithful to John’s habitual use of irony in making a true statement under the guise of its opposite, is intent on subverting the negative connotations of the mob’s denunciations by implanting simultaneous formulae to the contrary. For, while the words in their mouths may be derisory and antagonistic – matched by Bach with appropriately violent rhythm and dissonance – in the very act of singing them they are also, consciously or not, giving vent to their opposite meaning through their insistent affirmation of ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, of the Word and of its triumphant progress. Thus the more virulently they denounce him, the more credence his detractors give to his authority and true identity. How could anyone other than a religiously attuned and probing ‘listener’ like Bach have conceived such an ingenious and comprehensive strategy of code and symbol? Should we conclude that it was anathema to leave any foul-mouthed vilification of his God unchallenged? And did any among his first listeners spot the subtext? And, finally, when – and if – he was challenged and asked to explain his choice of texts and chosen style of composition, did Bach even try to elucidate his aims and strategy to the Leipzig clergy? Or did he just walk away, shrugging off their objections with incomprehension, fulminating against their obtuseness?

Having established this web of interconnections and theological subtexts – clear to Bach, if not to everyone – and having presented his intensely vivid setting of John’s account, he might have considered that he had done enough to draw in his listeners and to stress the contemporary significance of these events to the faithful of Leipzig. For in his eyes his music was incomplete unless it constantly posed questions that drew an engaged response from his public. This, surely, was what lay behind his decision to interrupt the flow at three points: once in response to Jesus’ definition of his kingship by means of a chorale re-affirming the believer’s allegiance

(‘Ach großer König’, No. 17); once in response to Pilate’s giving the order to scourge Jesus; and once at the point just before the crowd’s final baying for blood when Pilate ‘sought to release him’.

It is the last of these – the insertion of the pseudo-chorale ‘Durch dein Gefängnis’ (No. 22) – which has attracted the most scholarly comment ever since Friedrich Smend identified it as the centrepiece of the trial scene.<sup>30</sup> Smend drew attention to the presence of several symmetrical patterns underlying Bach’s structure at key points, by far the most significant being a *chiasmus* (derived from the Greek letter χ, the ‘sign of the cross’) centred on this intersection: not just the midpoint in the trial scene, but the ‘inner heart’ (or *Herzstück*) of the whole Passion. Bach placed this chorale here to enable the congregation to latch on to the central theological message, the paradox whereby ‘freedom has come to us’ as a result of Christ’s capture and self-sacrifice.<sup>aa</sup> It is located between two flanking *turbae* (‘Wir haben ein Gesetz’ and ‘Lässtest du diesen los’) set to the same music but with each in a different key (Nos. 21f & 23b). He turns the first of these into a chorus of strutting arrogance – ‘We have a law, and by our law he ought to die’ – a whopping send-up of ecclesiastical pomposity, satirical to the point of being comical. Then, by modulating to sharp keys for the second, he winds up the tension as the Jews seek to drive a wedge between Pilate and Caesar – ‘If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar’s friend.’

These choruses, in turn, are framed by further pairings of *turbae*, and, moving outwards in both directions, by arias, and, at the extremities, by two chorales (‘Ach großer König’ and ‘In meines Herzens Grunde’). The second of these has a particular magic – not least on account of its luminescent E major tonality and the intensely individual way Bach has harmonised it. Beyond that it occupies a pivotal position in Bach’s deliberate tonal shift from flat to sharp keys. Yet, as the centre of an overarching symmetrical structure, it is more readily appreciated on the page than in performance. The comparison frequently made between architecture and symmetrical design in Bach’s music is misleading. The unfolding of music in time creates a foreshortened perspective very different from the panoramic impression of symmetry registered by the eye,

say, by a Baroque palace. My experience is that in performance this chorale, despite the ravishing cadence that precedes it, as though to herald a reflection of great importance – of fate having been ordained – does not register either as the axis of the trial scene or as the hub of the entire Passion.

That prerogative goes to the immensely impressive tenor aria ‘Erwäge’ (No. 20) – a meditation on Christ’s self-sacrifice in which, after the escalating savagery of the *turbae*, we are offered the metaphor of ‘the most beautiful rainbow’ reflecting the blood and water on Jesus’ flailed back as a reminder of the ancient covenant between God and Noah after the flood.<sup>bb</sup> Significantly Bach has placed it precisely to straddle the chapter division in John’s Gospel: immediately after the mob’s insistence on Barabbas as the prisoner to be released and culminating in the scourging of Jesus, one of two exceptional moments when Bach lays aside the Evangelist’s narration and gives theatrical specificity and horror to the gruesome reality of Jesus’ flogging by the Roman soldiers. This is one of the most shocking juxtapositions in the whole work: the Evangelist’s outraged and outrageous burst of loud melismatic ‘rage’, followed immediately by the dulcet tonality of the ensuing arioso (‘Betachte, meine Seel’, No. 19). One moment we see Jesus’ back torn and blood-streaked by flogging, and the next we are encouraged to see it as something beautiful – as the sky in which the rainbow appears as a sign of divine grace – close to what J. G. Ballard had in mind, perhaps, when he refers to the ‘mysterious eroticism of wounds’.<sup>31</sup> That Bach attached exceptional importance to this arioso and its succeeding aria is manifest both from their length (with the full *da capo* of the aria, the scene runs to more than eleven minutes) and its highly unusual scoring – for two violas d’amore and a continuo of (implied) lute, gamba and organ.<sup>cc</sup> Outwardly this looks like a high-risk strategy: to halt the gripping dramatic forward momentum of the Roman trial scene with its layers of political posturing, collusion and refutation. Yet Bach’s instinct was sound. This, the nadir of Jesus’ physical degradation, was precisely the moment to halt the motion and to reflect and meditate on its consequences for mankind – to balance an arioso and aria of moving subjectivity in response to

the overall objectivity of John's account. The listener is led by means of suggestive (and theologically loaded) metaphors – and still more by beguiling musical textures – to contemplate the lacerated body of Jesus, rather as Grünewald does in his Isenheim Altarpiece and Hans Holbein does in his *Dead Christ in the Tomb*, with *ängstlichen Vergnügen* ('anxious pleasure') in so far as it leads to a pained, uneasy gratitude.<sup>dd</sup> The eruptive force, sensuality and eroticism in Bach's expression of religious sentiment in this central aria may have been another moment to unsettle the Orthodox clergy of Leipzig and turn them against him. In the arioso that follows we are presented with the equivalent of Dürer's Passiontide woodcuts in which flowers, in this case *Himmelschlüsselblumen* (primroses or cowslips), bloom from the crown of thorns. Bach is ultra-precise in his choice of instruments here: a pair of violas d'amore, the most tender, consoling instruments in his locker, with their 'sympathetic' strings, contrasted with the lute (or, in a later version, harpsichord) to suggest the pricking of the thorns, and serving to point up the contrast by very obvious tonal means – a tritone leap in the voice from C to F<sup>♯</sup> on *Schmerzen* to instigate sharpened harmonies whose raised pitches and upward tritone give instantly recognisable musical equivalence to the thorns, with the ensuing celestial relaxation going to the flat keys (G minor) for the blooming of the 'key-to-heaven-flower'. The impression is made all the stronger by manifest visual imagery: one need only glance at the even curve of the bridge<sup>ee</sup> of the six- (or sometimes seven-) stringed viola d'amore (with a further and highly symbolic row of six or seven 'sympathetic' strings) to muse whether it was this gentle ellipse which put the idea into Bach's head for using a pair of these rare stringed instruments as the means to evoke the rainbow – or was it its iridescent tonal colour or a combination of both? Then a glance at the score reveals that the lined pattern of the opening phrase of the aria – three notes up and three down above and across the stave – suggests to both eye and ear the arc of the rainbow (See Plate 20.). On top of this, Bach furnishes other ascending and descending figures that mirror the shape of the firmament – and conceivably of

Jesus' trial – all contributing to the image of his humiliations as signs of God's grace emanating from above.

To this one could add its exceptional difficulty for the singer – never (as we have seen on a number of previous occasions) a matter of oversight let alone wilfulness on Bach's part, but intrinsic to his philosophical purpose. The stupendous technical effort required by the tenor – with virtually no time to breathe – to emulate the mellifluous and weightless fluency of the superhuman violas demands that we ponder human fallibility. The dactylic motif sung by the Evangelist when describing Jesus' scourging returns and permeates the entire aria – insistent enough to remind us that it is the weals on Jesus' back that are here being evoked, but now softened and curved in such a way as to suggest the promised rainbow. Then, early in the B section, after the tenor sings the scourging rhythm for the first time and the instruments strain to delineate the 'flood-waves of our sins' deluge', Bach parts the clouds and suddenly the rainbow miraculously appears. To bring this off in performance requires, besides stamina, imagination and a rock-solid technique, a combination of tensile strength and lyricism never easily achieved.



John's way of introducing the final section of his Passion account is surprisingly succinct: no sooner has Pilate issued the death warrant than Jesus is bound and 'led away ... bearing his Cross' (19:16–17) to Golgotha. With few words to work with, Bach elongates the narration by a series of drastic modulations – from B minor (using sharps for the last of the *turbae*) through a symbolic and tortuous shift back to flats<sup>ff</sup> and eventually to G minor, the key in which the Passion started, in the process pushing the tonal system of his day beyond its normally accepted boundaries. During a break in the narrative the faithful are now urged to seek solace in Jesus' Crucifixion and to hurry to Golgotha, where his pilgrimage will be

fulfilled. For this new tableau, Bach, or his unknown librettist, adjusts Brockes's text – with its unsavoury injunction to the Jews to leave their ‘dens of murder’ – to make it clear that it is *our* ‘besieged souls’ which are here being called on – to hurry to ‘embrace the wings of faith’ at the foot of the Cross. He substantiates this shift in emphasis by allowing the timorous souls to break into the aria (No. 24) with their repeated *Wohin? ... Wohin? ... Wohin?* to express their yearning for redemption. (Perhaps we are meant to recall the tenor’s – Peter’s – despairing *exclamatio*, *Wohin?* in ‘Ach, mein Sinn’ at the end of Part I.) He will use the same rhetorical figure (a detached series of rising fifths and sixths) again for *O Trost* in ‘Es ist vollbracht’. Once more Bach uses a theatrical device – protagonist and chorus, foreground and background – to help us to experience simultaneously the evolving historical action and the sense that it is also happening now. He takes only what he needs from Brockes’s paraphrased text, modifies, edits it and re-tells the story from a contemporary perspective. These vignettes – a lone soloist with a choral interjection behind – are all the more potent for their rarity.

This last section of Bach’s *John Passion* is stamped by its rapid juxtapositions of mood. First we are presented with the narration of Christ’s Crucifixion and Pilate’s insistence on the royal inscription being translated into several languages. Then the crowd, in a final puff of self-importance, appropriates the music which Bach had given earlier to the Roman soldiers when they staged Jesus’ mock coronation. This time it is to dispute Jesus’ right to the title of ‘King of the Jews’, Pilate’s sole gesture of mitigation and one that he now refuses to withdraw. The scene closes with the chorale ‘In meines Herzens Grunde’ (No. 26): a radiant affirmation of the fusion of Jesus’ ‘name and Cross’, it marks the arrival of the faithful at Golgotha (in response to the bass’s earlier exhortation).

From here there is a momentary descent into levity, given a decidedly sinister twist, as the Roman soldiers squabble over the division of Jesus’ clothes. Like the gravediggers’ scene in *Hamlet*, this is little more than a sideshow; but, by injecting a dose of ordinary life at this point, it somehow carries over into the more essential components of the concluding drama that are happening

centre-stage. In Bach's overall tonal planning it has a significant part to play: being set in neutral C major means that it marks the boundary between the 'ambit' of flat keys used by Bach in the Crucifixion and for the royal inscription, and the sharp keys he will then turn to for Jesus' last words and death. This in itself could be a clue to its disproportionate length, for it needs to balance the equivalent 'ambit' in C (and its closely related keys) used at the beginning of the trial scene. As the only 'ambit' to stay firmly within a single key, it gives an ironic twist to the soldiers' words 'Let us not divide'. Purely as a composition it is an intriguing piece, one which makes virtuoso demands of the chorus. Rhythmic elasticity, agile coloratura and gleeful syncopations are all called on to illustrate the argument over who will have the right to make off with Jesus' cloak, like scurrying rats. At the same time the singers must ensure that their lines synchronise with the Alberti bass line, itself a depiction of the dice being shaken. It is all highly effective: parodistic, naturalistic and theatrical at the same time, but also grotesque, like a scene from Hogarth, culminating in the sopranos' leap up the octave to a top A in the penultimate bar as a ghoulish shriek. Bach's use of an infectious, toe-tapping rhythm in such debased surroundings suggests to me that, in his view, this is rock-bottom human behaviour, lower even than the politics of hate.<sup>88</sup>

Symbolically we have been shown a world divided between 'goats' and 'sheep' – the squabbling soldiers and the faithful standing at the foot of the Cross. From the crowd now emerge the three Marys and the narrator, the disciple 'whom Jesus loved'. Bach rises to new heights in the sensitivity of his word-setting and the way his recitative flows in and out of lyrical arioso, yet quite free of histrionics. For the second time in the Passion he turns to Vulpius' memorable tune, here to acknowledge Jesus as the faithful son who makes provision for his mother's care.

Most poignant of all is the way his last words – *Es ist vollbracht* – are carried through, imitated and transposed by the viola da gamba in the celebrated alto aria (No. 30). The use of this already old-fashioned instrument, with its highly individual and plangent sonority, an etiolated reflection of the human voice, is a calculated

device – one that he had used only once previously, in his first cantata cycle (BWV 76) and was to use again in the *Matthew Passion*. Again, as in ‘Ach, mein Sinn’, Bach adopts the majestic gestural language of the High French style, but here with the opposite effect: where in Peter’s aria it was speeded up to convey extreme agitation, here it is dirge-like to explore the borderline between life and death.<sup>hh</sup> In the B section the gamba’s tone and melody disappear completely in the wild arpeggiation of the string band – a cameo image of Christ as the hero of Judah. The clarion call of open strings, the adoption of Monteverdi’s martial style, the D major tonality – it is hard to imagine a more dramatic articulation of John’s view of the Crucifixion as the supreme victory. Yet, with the abrupt cadence on a diminished seventh, Bach draws a halt to this outburst, and suddenly a question mark is attached to the words *und schließt den Kampf* (‘and ends his victorious fight’). The return to the ornate and elegiac gamba melody, to Jesus’ last words (‘It is finished’) matched in their melodic outline by the singer and then, in a total break with conventional practice, repeated one last time over the gamba’s dying cadence, is a clear sign that no empty triumphalism is intended here. This aria is Bach’s strongest yet most balanced way of interpreting John’s account – as both a meditation on Christ’s suffering and as the victorious affirmation of his identity, the hidden God revealed through faith on the Cross. It is also a way of insisting that comfort and consolation (*Trost*) are available for those ‘besieged’ (*angefochtnen*) or ‘afflicted’ (*gekränkten*) souls who have been addressed in these last two arias.

A mere two bars – to describe the death of Jesus – separate this aria and the next. Bach’s gently falling melodic line is the perfect match for John’s words (*Und neiget das Haupt und verschied* / ‘and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost’). Now comes the second of Bach’s dialogues for bass and chorus (No. 32), and it arrives at a terrible moment. At first it seems perplexing that he should open with such a bold swinging melody in D major for the solo cello after the ethereal timbre of the gamba. The heroic lion of Judah now seems to prance and paw the air, where in the middle of the

previous aria he roared his way to victory; but as soon as the voice enters it is clear from the angularity of the main theme, and attempts by the singer to counter its falling sixths and sevenths with upward leaps, that this is a feint to disguise a profound unease. A succession of questions are addressed to the *teurer Heiland* ('precious Saviour') voicing the fears and doubts of the whole community of the newly bereaved. What does it signify? Was it all worth it? Has death been overcome? What will be the upshot for humanity? Amid these concerns the four-voiced choir murmur a deathbed chorale to the same Vulpius tune-setting, but now a fifth lower than just a few minutes earlier. The interleaving of two poetic texts, one rhetorical and the other an answering chorale, is a dialogic device we have already come across in the cantatas, and one that Bach will expand still further in the *Matthew Passion*: words and music juxtaposed in two different timescales – the cultural or actual 'present' of a communal act of hymn-singing slowed down to synchronise with the 'subjective' time of the individual reflecting on these perplexing issues.

Now for the second time Bach interrupts John's account with an interpolation from Matthew – again for a specific purpose. Earlier it was to describe Peter's tears and to reinforce the way he stands for the individual suffering a crisis of belief. Here it is to rectify or preserve the balance he has tried to maintain from the outset – between the suffering and eventual triumph of Christ. He follows Matthew's description of the earthquake, and the veil of the Temple being 'rent in twain from the top to the bottom' (27:51–2) with a dramatic arioso for tenor which, while staying within the expressive gamut of the Evangelist's style, expands on this vision of apocalyptic disturbance. This leads without a break into the soprano threnody 'Zerfließe, mein Herze' (No. 35). At first the elegiac tone and human pathos of this aria seem out of place in this Passion-setting so strong in its emphasis on Christ's kingship; but soon we realise that it is the perfect foil for the earlier soprano aria, the carefree 'Ich folge dir' (No. 9) of Part I, marking the distance that the journey has taken us in the interim. For a final time Bach hits on a startlingly original selection of instruments<sup>ii</sup> ideally adjusted to the mood – one of

deepest sorrow and grief. He combines a transverse flute and a tenor oboe – the oboe da caccia, so called because of its open hornlike bell made of brass – with the soprano over a throbbing basso continuo, and weaves them together in a four-part linear discourse. Again, for this final arioso/aria pairing he has turned to Brockes's text, but purges it of some of its worst excesses. By now one is so used to the myriad ways Bach finds for easing grief and soothing the battered heart, it comes as a shock when he paints a tableau of unalloyed mourning. This is keening with an incomparable depth of feeling, and the overall effect is achingly beautiful.



The emotional temperature now has to come down. The coda of the Passion remains elegiac but devoid of sentimentality. The final utterances of the Evangelist are the two longest in the work. (This encourages the tendency by some modern evangelists to sing them as though they were the final words of Schubert's *Winterreise*, forgetting in the process that they are primarily story-tellers responsible for getting things going and keeping them moving, and not part of the story itself.) In the first of them John is at pains to explain those Jewish customs and traditions which by the time he was writing had become unfamiliar to his widely flung readership. The most physical moment in the *John Passion* is when ‘one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water’ (John 19:34). One senses that Bach wants his Evangelist to grasp the attention of his listeners at this moment – to reinforce John’s insistence that he was a witness to this action, and that what he is saying is the truth.<sup>jj</sup> The fervour of their assent can then find its voice in the chorale ‘O hilf, Christe, Gottes Sohn’ (No. 37), though it rather drains away in the modally ambiguous final cadence; is this F major or the (implied) dominant of B<sup>3</sup>? The very last recitative recounts the deposition and burial. Its harmonies are just as explorative as before, but now they extend the Evangelist’s

lower range: suddenly there are five bottom Cs for him to negotiate, when there have been only two others elsewhere in the entire Passion. They are there for a purpose and show once more Bach's skill in establishing mood and specific colour in his setting of individual words. There is a new tenderness in his description of the binding of Jesus' body in linen clothes appropriate to the way it reminds us of the swaddling clothes of Jesus' infancy. That tenderness remains right to the end.

Coming to the *John Passion* by way of the cantatas that precede it, one might expect a final chorale at this point – and of course it will end this way, but not before Bach has balanced his monumental opening chorus with another of matching spaciousness. 'Ruht wohl' (No. 39) may owe something to the Hamburg Passion oratorios, which often ended with a choral lullaby, but if there is any closer model for this choral rondo – at least in the melodic shape and rhythmic ambiguity of its opening – it is a rondeau, the second movement from his B minor flute suite, BWV 1067, the 'Ouvertüre' No. 2. That piece surely gives us an idea of what Bach intended here – a chorus that is simultaneously song and dance, with its individual lines woven together to imply a gentle choreography.<sup>kk</sup> One has to turn to Brahms for an equivalent meshing of textures and rhythmic lilt. The expressive tone manages to be collective yet intensely personal, the lines lyrical and more singer-friendly here than practically anywhere else in Bach's writing for chorus. Significantly this is one of only two occasions (the other being the last in each set of *Wohins* in No. 24) where Bach calls for an unaccompanied chorus – or at least one undoubled by instruments. A sense of ritual – of the deposition and of a reverential lowering of the body into the grave – permeates the chorus. 'Be fully at peace' is the invocation, deliberately repeated again and again, always in the same key, with a soothing poignancy; but the way the final C minor cadence is approached (by means of a high A<sup>3</sup> in the sopranos) undermines and belies that peace.

Bach's decision to follow 'Ruht wohl' with a chorale (No. 40) has come in for criticism; but the truth is that in performance it *works*,

returning us to the here and now – in *this* church and on *this* day – removing the last vestiges of grief and reminding us of a future of uncertainty. This is but the latest example of the immense care Bach lavished on the chorale harmonisations of his *John Passion*. Its first half focuses on the grave’s repose and 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 increases 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 with the repeated plea *erhöre mich ... erhöre mich ... erhöre mich* (‘hear me ... hear me ... hear me’). Easter is still two days away, but the affirmation here is nonetheless conclusive.

That conclusive cadence may have been Bach’s final grievous error in the eyes of the Leipzig clergy: for to anticipate the Resurrection, or the ‘final day’, in this chorale and elsewhere in the course of the *John Passion* was to jar with the prevalently sombre mood of long-established Good Friday commemorations in Leipzig. Bach could have countered that he had allowed for the traditional singing by the choir of the funerary motet *Ecce quomodo moritur iustus* by Jacob Gallus and the congregational hymn ‘Nun danket alle Gott’, in line with liturgical practice since 1721, when, according to the sexton of the Thomaskirche, the Passion was performed for the first time in concerted style (see note on [this page](#)).<sup>32</sup> By this means he brought his listeners back to the contemplation of the events of Good Friday and created a final symmetry with his closing chorus, ‘Ruht wohl’.<sup>33</sup> The thing is, we cannot be certain that Bach had cleared the text of his *John Passion* with the clergy in advance. On this occasion he could have slipped his Passion text under the radar of consistorial scrutiny; but in the process he may inadvertently have put the churchmen on their guard. Even before they had heard a note of his music, just reading the printed libretto might have been enough to antagonise them. Then hearing and experiencing Bach’s Passion music for the first time, they could have been disturbed by the eruptive force with which it expresses religious sentiments (the charge of blasphemy

always seems to come from orthodox guardians of faith whenever spiritual or emotional power takes them by surprise). The sensuality and eroticism of the central aria, ‘Erwäge’, could have exposed Bach to the charge of irreverence (though the clergy were apparently happy to swallow eroticism in the sermon poetry of the day).

More likely to offend, perhaps, was the Passion’s weak overall emphasis on penitence, its close resemblance to Francke’s Pietist sermons, the failure of its interpolated movements (except for ‘Erwäge’) to interpret the Passion as God’s act of atonement for man’s fallen state and, above all, the ‘sheer intensity of the Johannine world view’ that Bach portrays.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to the image we gain from Matthew and the other synoptic Gospel writers, who give repeated emphasis to Christ’s humanity and his suffering, John portrays Jesus as someone with preternatural powers of insight: serene and magisterially in control of his destiny – and, ultimately, a victor.<sup>35</sup> In this, Bach is utterly faithful to John, showing Jesus to be seemingly unaffected by the vicissitudes of his trial, carrying out the mysterious will of the Father in full knowledge of what awaits him. His very dominance and confidence stands out above the typically human squabbling that surrounds him, a contrast that makes Bach’s setting so extraordinarily dramatic. Such an approach reveals a perfectly respectable pedigree, which theologians have traced back to the early Greek fathers’ view of the atonement, and one endorsed by Luther himself, who claimed that ‘the gospel of John is unique in loveliness ... the one fine, true and chief gospel ... far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them.’ In it one finds a ‘masterly account of how faith in Christ conquers sin, death, and hell; and gives life, righteousness and salvation’.<sup>36</sup>

Why, then, might this have been a controversial approach in Leipzig in 1724? According to the Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulén,<sup>37</sup> Luther was often misunderstood in this regard by his contemporaries and by later theologians, who saw in his teachings an unequivocal preference for the ‘satisfaction’ theory of the atonement – the one articulated for example by Matthew and given further emphasis in Paul’s epistles – whereby Jesus offers himself for

punishment and sacrifice on behalf of sinful humanity and to win freedom from God's wrath, as opposed to from the power of evil.<sup>11</sup> The view probably prevalent among the Orthodox Leipzig clergy of Bach's day, and passed on by them to their congregation, was that only the 'satisfaction' theory was legitimate. Bach, on the other hand, judging from the contents of his library (which, besides two editions of Luther's works, included a three-volume Bible with extensive theological commentary, and all the basic texts of both Pietism and Orthodoxy), seems to have understood and accepted the legitimacy of both views on the theory of atonement and their coexistence in Luther's work. His intention was evidently to give a balanced expression to each of these competing views in successive works – first in his *John Passion* and later in the *Matthew*. In constructing two such comprehensive but contrasted musico-theological statements – something not attempted by any contemporary composer –<sup>mm</sup> Bach was behaving less like a musician and more like a painter, showing the same subject from two different angles, each with validity and conviction.<sup>38</sup> Was this just bravado on his part? Was he intentionally defying local susceptibilities? From our later perspective we see that the two Passions were designed to fit into – and indeed encapsulate – his two complementary cantata cycles adjusted to the Leipzig liturgy of the day. But to the consistory it may have looked like a deliberate flouting of their authority, made worse by his refusal to explain his aims in language that they could understand.

There is no direct testimony for any of this. But some kind of negative reaction seems to have been the precursor of further, more heated and, for the most part, undocumented disputes surrounding his *John Passion* over the next fifteen years, causing Bach to revise it no less than four times: twice with major readjustments to its contents and doctrinal slant; once, in 1739, to abandon the work altogether for ten years; and then, in one last hurrah, to revive it a final time restored more or less to its original state. We can come close to gauging the clergy's reaction to Bach's first version of the *John Passion* by observing the drastic revisions he made to it exactly a year after its premiere. Out went the epic opening chorus ('Herr,

unser Herrscher') and the offending closing chorale ('Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein'), to be replaced by the chorale fantasia 'O Mensch bewein dein Sünde groß', planned and later used by Bach to conclude Part I of his *Matthew*, and a more elaborate concluding chorale, 'Christe, du Lamm Gottes', the final movement of the cantata he had presented at his Leipzig audition (BWV 23). Not without a certain creaking of its joints, the *John Passion* was adjusted to its new position as the climax of the chorale cantata cycle. Gone, too, was the tenor aria 'Ach, mein Sinn', to be replaced by 'Zerschmettert mich' and a bass dialogue with soprano chorale 'Himmel reiße, Welt erbebe'. Perhaps the most draconian substitution of all was a new tenor aria, 'Ach, windet euch nicht so', in place of the magical 'Betrachte/Erwäge' pairing, the keystone of Bach's original design for Part II. By any purely musical criteria, while the overall quality of the new numbers is consistently high, it would be hard to argue that these were 'improvements'. Taken as a whole, the effect was to dismember the initial patterning and structure of the original, as well as to alter its theological tone by giving greater prominence to the Pauline theology of justification by faith.

Only a strong consistorial rebuke can explain why Bach agreed to unpick key elements of his initial design and to jettison the consistent Johannine view of Jesus' atonement for humanity, and the far weightier importance he gave in each of the substituted movements to the acknowledgement of human guilt. If the consistory insisted that the *Passion oratorio* should give greater emphasis to the Orthodox 'satisfaction' theory (see footnote, [this page](#)), so be it: he would comply by introducing new music to match the sin-drenched imagery and the emphasis on God as 'strict judge'. One of the effects – but surely not the motivation – of the 1725 revisions to the *John Passion* was to bring it into line with the tone of the chorale cantata cycle that he had been presenting for the past ten months (as we saw in [Chapter 9](#)). A more drastic result was to destroy what seems to have been his plan, stretched over two years, to make the two Gospel accounts and the two theories of atonement

the pinnacles of his cantata cycles through successive and contrasted expression. By failing to complete the *Matthew* on time for Good Friday, Bach found himself boxed into a corner. Version 2 of the *John Passion* was a *pis aller*. By the time he next came to perform it, some five years later, all the interlopers had gone and the opening chorus was back in place, as was the ‘Betrachte/Erwäge’ pairing. But now strangely excised were the insertions from Matthew and the final chorale. An aria no longer extant replaced ‘Ach, mein Sinn’ and an instrumental *sinfonia* took the place of movements 33 to 35 (the veil of the Temple recitative, the tenor arioso ‘Mein Herz’ and the soprano aria ‘Zerfließe’).

Perhaps the conflict never really died down. We know for example that in March 1739 an emissary from the town clerk came to tell Bach that ‘the music he was planning to perform on the following Good Friday was not to be played until he had received due permission to do so, whereupon the latter replied that it had always been done so, it was of no particular interest to him, for he got nothing out of it anyway, and it was only a burden. He would notify the Superintendent that he had been forbidden to perform it. If there were objections to the text, why, it had already been performed several times before.’<sup>39</sup> What pain and hurt and simulated indifference lie behind those words in that civil service reported speech! It took him a further ten years to cease to smart over the injustice; and it was only when he had two years left to live that he brought the *John Passion* back with the original 1724 version restored in all its essentials.

If ever there was proof of the importance Bach attached to the work and, significantly, to its initial conception and design, it is the recently discovered evidence of consecutive performances in the last two years of his life: that on 4 April 1749 was perhaps the very last performance conducted by him. An autograph testimonial for Johann Nathanael Bammler (a former Thomaner prefect who helped Bach with the copying and textual revisions to the final version of the *John Passion*) dates from 12 April 1749, a week later; Bach’s hand there<sup>40</sup> is noticeably steadier and more fluent than in the late entries in the performing parts for the Passion, which previously had

been thought to be his last. The sudden, temporary collapse in his health seems to have occurred in the second half of April; but by June, though clearly weakened, he was back at work – on the *B minor Mass* and on the first set of proofs for *The Art of Fugue*. Based on the evidence of his handwriting, the last autograph entries in the performing material of the *John Passion* could not have been made before the spring of 1750. That performance took place on 27 March, perhaps under the direction of the senior prefect, one day before Dr Taylor operated on Bach's eyes, the Saturday before Easter.<sup>41</sup> Had he at last reached some sort of accommodation with the consistory or was this a final act of defiance, a flouting of a consistorial decree, and an insistence that he had been 'right' all along? At all events he prepared a fresh score of the Passion in which he himself wrote out the first eighteen folios before turning the remainder over to a copyist. By endorsing the original version, this last version brings 'Fassung Erster' and 'Letzter Hand' into alignment.

There may have been other factors besides those of theological difference behind the enforced revisions of 1725 and 1729 that might help to explain Bach's ultimate return to his initial version of the work – perhaps more fundamental reservations about the music itself, a sensitive nerve touched in the ongoing debate about the very nature of music's role in worship. For, whereas the Leipzig clergy might have found it hard to find anything deliberately subversive in Bach's creative endeavour (it is surely beyond reproach in its fidelity to John's Gospel), it certainly reveals what they might have recognised as a dangerous strain of artistic autonomy. It points up the essential differences between the Logos as spoken word and as set to – and transmogrified by – music.<sup>nn</sup> Quite apart from whether they were interested in, or even capable of discerning, the veiled patterns Bach constructed behind the obvious foreground ones (such as his juxtaposing worldly and spiritual perspectives on Jesus' identity, etc.) – the very qualities which set his *John Passion* apart from those of his contemporaries – they could hardly have failed to notice the compelling emotive power unleashed in his music. Tactlessly, perhaps, Bach was doing

the preacher's job more effectively than it could possibly be done by words alone. We might speculate whether the dialogues between Pilate and the crowd, Pilate and Jesus, things we find particularly poignant today, were perhaps uncomfortably theatrical – just too 'operatic' for what in their view was suitable as church music (though it is interesting that they never succeeded in getting him to tone this aspect down in subsequent revisions). By returning to the work in the last two years of his life and by restoring his initial conception of it, Bach was powerfully reasserting his position on the role the music of his *John Passion* could play in directing people's thoughts to the meaning of Christ's Passion in their lives.

## ↳

Let us return one last time to view the work from our own standpoint. There has to be an explanation why, in our secular age, listening to the *John Passion* seems to provide so uplifting an experience for so many people. I would suggest that the multilayered structure underpinning Bach's Passion can be 'felt', if not immediately seen or heard, by the listener, in the same way that flying buttresses, invisible to the visitor when entering a Gothic church, are essential to the illusion of lightness, weightlessness and the impression of height. In fact, the longer you study them the more numerous seem to be the geometric patterns of repetition, symmetry and cross-referring, varying in the sharpness or thinness of their outlines. To change the analogy, it is akin to the experience one gets when looking down on to the gravelly bed of a shallow stream through the filmy refractive prism of water constantly but subtly shifting these outline definitions. Only by looking beneath the surface do the patterns become clear, and at that point the inherently unstable relationship between words and music, and the dialectical one between voice and instrument, singer and player, can come into focus. Potentially every performance moves through this process of deciphering and clarification towards an unknown goal.

Any fragmentary contextual knowledge we can piece together will not – cannot – recapture the experience of listeners at its first performance, though it might serve to sharpen our response each time we encounter the music now. Although its original habitation is irretrievably lost, the work carries with it a potential novelty for those who themselves are open to novelty; for ‘this is a music that seems supremely wedded to a world of certainty and interconnectedness, yet its results, for many listeners at least, seem to be utterly unexpected and transformative.’<sup>42</sup> Musicians (who of course have a vested interest here) tend to believe that what Bach expressed in his first Passion – and indeed the manner of its expression – has a perennial validity and therefore merits re-application in every new performance. While we might aim to produce something that is close to Bach’s performance, it will inevitably manifest itself differently on every occasion and in each new context. There is a sense that the musical material he has left us is both complete and unfinished, and in thinking about the meaning of our performances we should recall the emphasis T. S. Eliot placed on ‘a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence’.<sup>43</sup> It is by anchoring it in our time that we re-connect with the timeless fertility of Bach’s imagination.

The springboard of his achievement is his direct interaction with the Gospel itself – its underlying themes, its antitheses and symbols – here more perceptibly than in the following *Matthew Passion*. 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 along with the underlying human drama in John’s account and brings it to the surface with the sympathetic realism of a Caravaggio or a Rembrandt. The 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 and every scene. Akin to the priority both painters gave to the play of darkness and its opposite is the way Bach’s music is suffused with a translucency exceptional even by his standards. When speaking of Rembrandt’s religious paintings, Goethe implied that the painter not so much ‘illustrated’

biblical events as took them ‘beyond their scriptural basis’.<sup>44</sup> That is exactly what Bach does here: but rather than pigment it is the musical substance that is ‘shone through’.

It is peculiarly difficult for us to grasp the prodigious craftsmanship and palpable sense of purpose in a work as complex as the *John Passion*. Bach seldom draws attention to the technical workings that underpin his compositional skills. Yet, like Brahms, he would have been quick to acknowledge that ‘without craftsmanship, inspiration is a mere reed shaken in the wind’.<sup>60</sup> Whether this can mean that his music was spiritually inspired (or, as some might claim, divinely engendered) depends of course on how we choose to reflect on the sources of his inspiration. When questioned further about the source of *his* inspiration, Brahms pointed to John’s Gospel and to Jesus’ words: ‘the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works ... He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do’ (14:10–12). Bach’s answer could have been identical. The *John Passion* holds our attention from beginning to end – its music stirring, disturbing, exultant and profoundly moving. In this work Bach 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.’



---

<sup>a</sup> Bach’s startling use of opposites here – between Jesus’ glorification (*Herrlichkeit*) and his abasement (*Niedrigkeit*) – can be traced back to Johann Arndt’s three sermons on Psalm 8 (*Auslegung des gantzen Psalters Davids* (1643)).

<sup>b</sup> John Butt suggests that in Britain, at any rate, ‘the public disgrace of not performing in the “approved” historical style was simply too heavy to bear for cash-strapped orchestras; moreover, the *Matthew Passion*’s traditional outing on Good Friday began to make much less sense as the public grew ever more indifferent to the notion of such a Friday. Greatly valued and still performed the *Matthew Passion* might be, but no longer as an unquestioned part of the mainstream repertoire’ (John Butt, *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions* (2010), p. 18).

<sup>c</sup> Nevertheless there was a tradition of support for concerted music within the liturgy by some of the Orthodox clergy in Leipzig, including August Pfeiffer (1640–98), who enthused about the importance of music in worship, even though he was stone deaf (his *Apostolische Christen-Schule* (1695) was in Bach's library), and Johann Benedikt Carpzov III, archdeacon of the Thomaskirche between 1714 and 1730 and whose family had connections to the Bachs (see Chapter 9, p. 318). We should not rule out the possibility that some of the clergy may well have been bowled over by the scale of Bach's *John Passion*, which was unprecedented in its length, drama and rhetorical force.

<sup>d</sup> In his 'Meditation on Christ's Passion', Luther had stressed its central importance for the believer: 'It is more beneficial to ponder Christ's Passion just once than to fast a whole year or to pray a psalm daily, etc.'; 'Unless God inspires our heart, it is impossible for us of ourselves to meditate thoroughly on Christ's Passion' (*Eyn Sermon von der Betrachtung des heyligen Christi* (1519) in LW, Vol. 42).

<sup>e</sup> Telemann's student ensemble, the *collegium musicum*, continued to give concerts of church music in the university church on feast-days and during the fairs, while at the Neukirche, under Telemann's successors (Hoffmann, Vogler and Schott), music impregnated with the Italian operatic style went on being performed there during the first two decades of the eighteenth century.

<sup>f</sup> All that was missing were the operatic sets and costumes. Brockes's was the most celebrated in a genre called Passion oratorios, set to a completely original and non-liturgical poetic text that was distinct in purpose and structure from the oratorio-like Passions, which faithfully adhered to the biblical text (normally confined to one of the four Gospels but sometimes synthesising their accounts), even when varied with meditative aria-interpolations and, of course, chorales. His sentimental literalism has much in common with the sculptures to be found in Bavarian Catholic churches of the time, which, at their worst, degenerate into a zealous but dismal kitsch, a pageant of often sadomasochistic imagery. Basil Smallman draws attention to the paradox that 'these libretti [by Brockes and others] were part of a reaction against the Pietist cult of simplicity ... their tasteless imagery and their preoccupation with the grosser physical aspects of pain and suffering – traits which were characteristic of Pietist poetry' (*The Background of Passion Music* (1971), p. 76).

<sup>g</sup> This was a practice going back to 1530 in which, at the main service on Good Friday, in place of the Gospel, John's account of the Passion story was chanted in front of the lectern in the chancel 'by an alumnus as Evangelist ... [while] a deacon had the role of Christ and the choir that of the people' (*Bildnisse der sämmtlichen Superintendenten der Leipziger Diöces* (1839), p. 54). The fact that as late as 1722 a new set of parts of Walter's Passions were written out for the *turba* chorus – simple four-part chordal responses, in contrast to the monophonic delivery of the biblical narrative – is an index of this enduring tradition (H.- J. Schulze, 'Bachs Aufführungsapparat' in *Die Welt der Bach-Kantaten*, Christoph Wolff (eds.) (1999), Vol. 3, p. 148).

<sup>h</sup> We learn that Bach was paid twelve thalers for this guest appearance and that twenty copies of the libretto of that particular Passion setting were printed for use by the courtiers; but we do not know whether the fee was paid for composing, as opposed to supervising the performance of someone else's music (A. Glöckner, 'Neue Spuren zu Bachs "Weimarer" Passion', *Leipziger Beiträge zur Bach-Forschung*, Vol. 1 (1995), p. 35 NBR, p. 78).

<sup>i</sup> A ‘short’ conducting score survives in a later copyist’s hand, extracts of which appeared in Arnold Schering’s *Musikgeschichte Leipzigs* ((1926) Vol. 2, pp. 25–33) – enough to demonstrate Kuhnau’s mastery of recitative style but not a lot else besides. Johann Adolph Scheibe evidently knew Kuhnau’s *Mark Passion*: ‘sometimes he succeeded in writing deep and poetic music [as] shown by ... his last sacred works, especially his Passion Oratorio which he finished a few years before his death ... We see how clearly he understood the employment and laws of rhythm, we see too how careful he always was to make his sacred works melodious and flowing, and in many cases really affecting’ (*Critischer Musikus* (1737), Vol. 2, p. 334). Against this, Schering’s study of the surviving Kuhnau fragment elicited disparaging observations upon it: its overall value is ‘astonishingly limited in terms of fantasy ... narrow in its musical horizon ... a mosaic of backward-looking forms in terms of style and expression’ (Schering, op. cit.). Yet the sexton of the Thomaskirche, Johann Christoph Rost, marked down the premiere of Kuhnau’s Passion in his diary as a red-letter day: ‘On Good Friday of the year 1721, in the Vespers service, the Passion was performed for the first time in concerted style [*musiciret*]’ (BD II, No. 180/ NBR, p. 114).

<sup>j</sup> Standing behind Kuhnau’s experiment was a century and a half of varied attempts at Passion oratorios and oratorio Passions beginning with Antonio Scandello’s *John Passion* (1561), in which plainsong alternated with short bursts of polyphony. To me by far the most intriguing of these prototypes are the three modally structured settings by Heinrich Schütz: his *Luke Passion* of 1664, his *John* of 1665 and his *Matthew* of 1666. Restricted to a small *a cappella* vocal ensemble, Schütz evolves his own idiosyncratic style of recitation, one that proves far more expressive than that of many of his successors, balancing it with brief but striking choral interventions. Between Schütz and Kuhnau probably the most notable examples are those by Thomas Selle – his *John Passion* (1641) being the first to include instrumental interludes, and four *Matthew* Passions: by Christian Flor (1667), in which there is the embryo of orchestrally accompanied *turbae*; by Johann Sebastiani (1672), the first to include simple chorales; by Johann Theile (1673), in which the Evangelist is accompanied by viols; and by Johann Meder (1701), in which Jesus’ words are set in arioso. Here at last there are signs of expressive tension at the more dramatic junctures as well as a few well-crafted strophic arias. But only in Schütz’s Passions does one encounter a strong creative imagination flying free of the liturgically imposed restrictions, although in a more etiolated style than that of his successors, opening the door to a rich world of biblical exegesis. Performances today of any one of his three settings still prove capable of holding an audience in their spiritual and emotional grip.

<sup>k</sup> In his comparison of the two painters’ *Descent from the Cross*, Simon Schama suggests ‘where the emphasis in the Rubens is on action and reaction, in Rembrandt’s version it is on contemplation and witness ... doers are replaced by watchers’ (*Rembrandt’s Eyes* (1999), pp. 292–3). That, too, is the main difference, albeit oversimplified, between Bach’s *John* and *Matthew* Passions.

<sup>l</sup> Spitta is the first in a line of commentators who fail to detect in Bach’s opening chorus any of the ‘ideas of tenderness or love’ we associate with John’s Gospel. I feel this is wrong. A lot, of course, hinges on interpretation. To my mind the B section beginning *Zeig uns durch deine Passion* (‘Show us through your Passion’) implies tender, *dolce* singing, while the upward skipping A minor scale of the sopranos (bars 77–8) signifies the joy and release implicit in

Christ's atonement. That the road to victory for humankind is shown to be bumpy and hard-going is evident from the sharp contrasts between these positive upward arpeggios (*zu aller Zeit* / 'at all times') and the dissonant re-descent in *piano* (*auch in der größten Niedrigkeit* / 'even in the greatest abasement'). The synchronisation of a spirited vocal melisma (*verherrlicht worden bist* / 'you have been glorified') with the turbulent movement of the upper strings is a brilliant association of opposed ideas, one that he had already adumbrated in the final chorale of BWV 105, *Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht* (see Chapter 9, p. 301).

<sup>m</sup> Daniel R. Melamed has shown that the attribution to Keiser is found 'in only one source not connected with the early performances [in Hamburg] and is open to question' (*Hearing Bach's Passions* (2005), p. 81). Bach brought the performing parts of this *Mark Passion* with him to Leipzig in 1723. Don O. Franklin makes a persuasive case for viewing this work (often cited as a model for Bach's *Matthew Passion*) as an important source for the *John Passion*: 'Bach drew extensively on [it] ... in compiling the libretto for his first oratorio passion' – 'in general contour and style' – and there is indeed a striking 'similarity in the overall proportions of the two works' ('The Libretto of Bach's *John Passion* and the Doctrine of Reconciliation: An Historical Perspective' in *Proceedings of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences*, A. A. Clement (ed.), Vol. 143 (1995), pp. 191–2, 195). That Bach held this score in high regard is given further proof in his decision to work on it further in a revival he gave of it in Leipzig in 1726.

<sup>n</sup> None other than Bertolt Brecht was fascinated by Bach's 'exemplary gestural music'. He admired Bach's precision in defining locality from the outset, in the very first words of the Evangelist: 'Jesus ... went forth with his disciples over the brook Cedron' (John 18:1).

<sup>o</sup> Another indicator of the potency of Bach's use of chorales in the *John Passion* lies in their homophony: by adding instruments to double the vocal lines Bach tilted the balance in favour of the top and bottom, the extra edge of the oboes adding to that of the violins but softened by the flutes, the bassoon functioning the same way and supported by double bass and organ – the effect is rich but never opaque. None of this serves any purpose, of course, if there is not a total identification and understanding of the text by the instrumentalists, even to the point of imitating the exact word-shapes and vocal inflections of the hard-working singers. Bach's music is full of instances when his singers are called on to emulate the agility and technical fluency of the instruments in the interest of clearly articulated running passages and percussive rhythms. Whereas in the *turba* choruses they are stretched to the limit, here in the chorales the players are required to return the compliment: to add colour and depth but never to mask or overwhelm the singers nor to reduce the hieratic impact of the sung delivery of the text.

<sup>p</sup> Wilfrid Mellers makes a suggestive parallel here to William Blake: this is a 'Song of Innocence' to complement the preceding 'Song of Experience' (*Bach and the Dance of God* (1980), p. 103).

<sup>q</sup> Peter's twin denials (*Ich bins nicht*) were understood in the Lutheran tradition and by subsequent theologians to be the 'negative counterparts' of Jesus' earlier insistence (*Ich bins*). Bach sets both as strong dominant-tonic cadences, but in Peter's case he adds an emphatic appoggiatura to the word *nicht*. Significantly the modulations confirmed by Peter's cadences, first in G, then in A, have already been established in the transitional recitatives: as Eric Chafe observes, by making Jesus 'the agency of the modulation to sharps', Bach ensures that we understand that he is also

the agency of Peter's redemption (*J. S. Bach's Johannine Theology: The St John Passion and the Cantatas for Spring 1725* (forthcoming)).

<sup>r</sup> Actually this glance is described neither in Matthew's nor John's account: it comes in Luke (22:61) and is paraphrased in the tenth verse of Paul Stockmann's hymn that Bach uses here as the culmination of Part I. Bach possessed a copy of Heinrich Müller's sermons on Christ's Passion (*Von Leyden Christi*) in which he says 'The Saviour's glance was like the sun, warming Peter's cold heart' (*Der Blick des Heylandes war gleichsam die Sonne, / die das kalte Herz in Petro erwärmete*).

<sup>s</sup> Mellers (op. cit., p. 109) claims it is 'the most humanly passionate music Bach ever wrote', and one can hardly disagree with that. But in the process, as Laurence Dreyfus astutely observes, Bach plays fast and loose with the poetic structures of the text and ignores 'certain sanctioned doctrinal views so as to highlight aspects of the experience he found more compelling'. Unconventional as Bach's word-setting is here, its very disjointedness is, I believe, a deliberate ploy – a way of conveying despair and choking remorse. If one has done something reprehensible (like betraying one's idol) one does not necessarily speak or sing in rhyming couplets. Dreyfus recognises this: that Bach, 'in his anti-literary way, is busy focusing on a peculiarly personal and pointedly self-authorised reading of the text'. But to state 'most [of the words] are drowned out by the music, by all the attention Bach has paid to the ritornello' would indicate to me signs of a poorly conducted performance ('The Triumph of "Instrumental Melody": Aspects of Musical Poetics in Bach's *St John Passion*', *Bach Perspectives*, Vol. 8 (2011)). Indeed, it is the very subjectivity of Bach's interpretation and the explosively expressive force of his music that makes it so compelling to us. This aria in particular is one in which, like Monteverdi before him, Bach aims to move the passions of his listeners. To arrive at this (again like Monteverdi) he himself needs to be moved. Bach is manifestly stirred by Peter's desperate situation and is utterly true to its underlying disclosure of human failings. Proof of his success here comes via the mysterious transformative processes known to all theatre people (and some performing musicians): those experiences of actions and conditions shared between performers and audiences that seem to vault over temporal, cultural and linguistic barriers. This is the phenomenon for which the Italian neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti claims to have found a biological explanation. His discovery of 'mirror neurons' suggests that we are capable of an instantaneous understanding of the emotions of others through neural imitation, and that there are cognitive processes that allow us to interpret sensory information as laden with a particular emotive significance (G. Rizzolatti and C. Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain* (2008)).

<sup>t</sup> In this Bach was following the tradition of seventeenth-century Passion sermons, as Elke Axmacher points out ('Aus Liebe will mein Heyland sterben' (1984), p. 155), in which Peter's denial and the second Matthew interpolation (the 'earthquake' scene – see below) were introduced in order to reinforce the need for repentance.

<sup>u</sup> The Jews regarded Gentile houses – and these of course included the Roman Praetorium – as unclean, and purity was at a premium at Passover.

<sup>v</sup> To get an idea of quite how successful Bach is here in his dramatic pacing, one need only compare his setting of the Roman trial with the equivalent portion in Johann Mattheson's Passion oratorio, *Das Lied des Lammes* (1723), a work

Bach may have known. Both composers draw on a common literary source, a libretto by Christian Heinrich Postel; both divide John's narrative at the same points; both begin with the chorale 'Christus, der uns selig macht'; both use Postel's text for 'Durch dein Gefängnis' (Mattheson as a duet, Bach as a chorale); and both place it midway through Verse 12. Quite apart from the enormous discrepancy in musical style and substance, the main difference is one of pacing and proportion. As Don O. Franklin observes (op. cit., pp. 188–9), where Mattheson, following Postel, places his greatest emphasis on the arias – seven of them being lengthy arioso for Jesus and Pilate – Bach breaks the flow of the action only three times (for 'Betrachte/Erwäge', the pseudo-chorale 'Durch dein Gefängnis' and the dialogue aria 'Eilt') and is thus able to drive the action forwards, focusing our attention on the intense interaction between Jesus, Pilate and the crowd – something beyond Mattheson's capabilities – and framing the entire scene with two chorales.

<sup>w</sup> Part of the trouble here, as Chafe notes, is that 'contemporary theologians interested in Bach and historical Lutheranism, who are the likeliest to understand why Bach might have done what he did in the *John Passion*, have seldom had much grounding in music, whereas musicians [or, rather, musicologists, I suggest] almost never have sufficient involvement in the necessary theological modes for his decisions. Thus questions of symmetry in the design of the Passion are continually addressed as a "problem" of musical form, and one, it seems, that can be speculated on with no particular knowledge of its theological correlates. Such interpretations give very much the sense of being pulled from a hat' (*J. S. Bach's Johannine Theology: The St John Passion and the Cantatas for Spring 1725*).

<sup>x</sup> To this Chafe's very reasonable response is that 'the boundary between the "audible" and the "inaudible" is not a certain one, that the whole person is a compound of intellectual and affective qualities whose separation does violence to the whole. In this respect, what Bach achieved in the design of the *St John Passion* is what most sets him apart from his many lesser contemporaries.' Earlier in the same chapter he conceded that 'sometimes there appear to be multiple, even overlapping patterns, or partial patterns, no one of which can be considered to represent the "structure" of the work' (*J. S. Bach's Johannine Theology: The St John Passion and the Cantatas for Spring 1725*, [Chapter 5](#)).

<sup>y</sup> John Butt concedes that theological inquiry into the inspirational roots of Bach's Passion music 'could be useful if it suggests thought processes that are of a piece with the thinking behind the music as an aesthetic art' ('Interpreting Bach's Passions: Outline of Proposed Scheme of Research' submitted to the Leverhulme Foundation (2005)) – balancing different forms of complexity, 'heard' and 'unheard' elements, the counterpointing of ideas, speakers and historical times.

<sup>z</sup> Perhaps more than might have been the case in 1724, this may be more a function of our own agnostic age than of Bach's portrayal of the man. The question 'What if he'd done the right thing and set Jesus free?' lurks somewhere in the background of our response to him nowadays. He, of course, 'stands at the centre of the Christian story and God's plan of redemption. Without his climactic judgement of Jesus, the world would not have been saved. Without Christ's death ... there would have been no Resurrection, no founding Christian miracle' (Ann Wroe, *Pilate: Biography of an Invented Man* (2000), p. xii). As head of the occupying forces in the troublesome province of Judaea, and with an estimated 6,000 legionaries to control a population of approximately 2.5 million, Pilate faced a major problem of

governance, particularly at the explosive time of the Jewish Passover, the key festival of the foundation of the nation, when many congregated in Jerusalem to celebrate it. (John Drury, ‘Bach: John Passion’, pre-concert talk, 22 Apr. 2011, Snape Maltings, p. 1).

<sup>aa</sup> By altering a single word of Postel’s text – *ist* in place of *muss* – Bach alters the entire meaning of the chorale in line with his *Christus victor* theological stance. Man’s freedom is no longer a fond hope but an accomplished fact.

<sup>bb</sup> Chafe refers us to ‘the traditional image of Christ in majesty portrayed ... seated in judgement on the rainbow, a sword protruding from one ear and a lily from the other – symbols of the division of humanity that John continually emphasizes’ (*Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (1991), pp. 316–17). According to Roland Bainton, ‘Luther had seen pictures such as these and testified that he was utterly terror-stricken at the sight of Christ the Judge’ (*Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950), pp. 22–5).

<sup>cc</sup> Perhaps taking his cue from Albert Schweitzer, who found ‘an indescribable felicity’ in these two movements (*J. S. Bach* (1911), Vol. 2, p. 181), Wilfrid Mellers (op. cit., pp. 118–24) waxes lyrical on the deceptive ‘balm-dispensing repose’ of the preceding bass aria – outwardly calm due to the soothing combination of lute and viole d’amore, but tonally unstable. He connects it to the Orpheus myth (which had eventually been validated by the Christian mystics and by medieval Platonists), both in the singing and via the lute – as post-Renaissance substitute for Orpheus’ lyre. If at this point Bach was consciously tapping in to the perceived analogy between Orpheus and Christ, it would make sense of a kind – the balm of the seven-stringed lyre the means by which the Christian soul (while contemplating its ‘highest good’ as a result of Jesus’ suffering) makes its journey heavenwards, returning ‘to the origin of music’s magic, that is, to heaven’ (Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, quoted by Joscelyn Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth* (1987), p. 61). Tenuous as is the link here, one might speculate on how far Bach might have agreed with Johann Mattheson’s attempt to prove that there must be music in heaven, far superior to anything we can imagine, that it existed before the creation of Man, just as it will last for ever (*Behauptung der Himmlichen Kunst* (1747), pp. 3, 6, 19). From here it is but a short step to considering how, as on other occasions already explored in the course of this book, Bach sought here to emulate ‘heavenly’ music, and the extent to which it embodied a type of therapeutic wholeness and perfection (see illustration p. 553).

<sup>dd</sup> Here, as John Drury notes, ‘ambiguous subjectivity could not be more extreme. Quite clearly the texts of both aria and aria are conscious of their ambivalence between grief and pain, delight and grief ... the ambiguity ... rooted in the ancient institution of sacrifice, whereby the innocent victim bears the suffering, even death, which would otherwise fall on the votaries. The affliction of the victim is their deliverance’ (op. cit.). In other words, Bach and his librettist are injecting a strong dosage of the ‘satisfaction’ theory (see p. 389) to balance the Johannine image of Jesus in glory.

<sup>ee</sup> Normal violin and viola bridges are not evenly elliptical: the curve is more pronounced to accommodate the two lower and thicker gut strings. Given the ravishing timbre of the viola d’amore (quite apart from their symbolic appropriateness) it is puzzling to find Bach replacing them in movements 31 and 32 with muted violins (and substituting organ or harpsichord in place of the lute) in later revivals. As Dürr rather drily comments, ‘It seems

appropriate to review the replacement of the original instruments as a makeshift solution to which the modern performer should adhere only if he finds himself confronted with the same problems as Bach' (*Johann Sebastian Bach's St John Passion: Genesis, Transmission and Meaning* (2000), p. 112).

<sup>ff</sup> In the process he inscribes the symbol of the Cross in the Evangelist's melodic line, just as he had done as a 22-year-old in BWV 4 – see [Chapter 5](#), pp. 135, 136), using it like a branding iron in order to fix it in his listeners' consciousness.

<sup>gg</sup> Another way of looking at it (as suggested to me by Robert Quinney) is that the behaviour of the soldiers is strangely neutral and disengaged, set as it is: it is almost as if we step out of the narrative proper, cutting away to a scene which, though it is actually happening at the foot of the Cross, could be a million miles away. The very lack of engagement of the soldiers in the momentous events taking place around them might provoke the faithful listener to even greater involvement and (self-) reflection.

<sup>hh</sup> Bach's use of the extreme dotted rhythms associated with Lully's majestic style is only superficially 'heroic'. As Michael Marissen says, 'only on the page, which listeners do not see, does the music appear majestic. As Bach's music has it, then, Jesus' majesty is "hidden" in its opposite, which is very much a Lutheran approach' (*Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St John Passion* (1998), p. 19).

<sup>ii</sup> Admittedly this was only at its revival in 1725 when he came to make his first of four revisions. Prior to that the sources indicate that both flute and oboe da caccia were to be doubled, while in the fourth version the flute was doubled by a muted violin (see Alfred Dürr, op. cit., p. 114).

<sup>jj</sup> 'It is a very odd thing about St John that while much of the time he is Platonic and Greek and high-minded, just occasionally, and particularly with Christ's wounds (as with Thomas, who puts his finger into them), there are occasional bursts of quite disconcerting physicality in his Gospel account' (John Drury, private correspondence).

<sup>kk</sup> Wilfrid Mellers singles it out as 'a dance of God ... fulfilling the vision of the early Christian mystics who saw the lyre- or viol- or flute-playing Christ as "leader of the dance; he knows how to touch the strings, to lead from joy to joy, with cherubim and seraphim the soul dances in the round"' (*Bach and the Dance of God*, p. 148).

<sup>ll</sup> Where John celebrates Jesus' triumph over the forces of evil and the law (which he describes as a 'curse' or 'wrath'), Matthew underscores Christ's work of atonement to God's 'satisfaction'. That Luther left no clearly defined statement on the subject of atonement does not mean that he necessarily held a preference for one of these two different, though not mutually exclusive, theories, or that the two could not have coexisted in his theology. Aulén's view is that over time Luther was gradually drawn back to the far older Johannine (*Christus victor*) view 'with a greater intensity and power than ever before'. As he says, 'we have only to listen to Luther's hymns to feel how they thrill with triumph, like a fanfare of trumpets.' This is equally true of Bach's settings of them in his cantatas.

<sup>mm</sup> Telemann, for example, who was required to compose a new Passion for each year he was musical director of Hamburg's five main churches (1721–67), did not seem to have felt the need to differentiate the theological leanings of the four Gospel writers. On the other hand, he adopted a technique much used by Bach in his cantatas, that of

inserting a parallel Old Testament text as preparation for each of the five sections into which he divided up the Passion story.

<sup>nn</sup> Even here the textural alterations to the restored 1724 movements show signs of theological decree and perhaps reflect changing literary tastes as well: the fresh joyousness of the original ‘Ich folge dir’ soprano aria is diminished by a reference to ‘my anxious path’ and the need to ‘suffer in patience’. The arioso ‘Betrachte’ loses its metaphor of heaven’s primroses flowing out of the crown of thorns, and refers now more closely to the scourging of Jesus. The tenor aria ‘Erwäge’ loses its glorious rainbow simile for something much blander, though the new words ‘Mein Jesu, ach!’ are slightly easier to sing.

<sup>oo</sup> This phrase may be apocryphal, coming as it does from an account of a conversation with Brahms and Joachim in the autumn of 1896 (German-American violinist Arthur M. Abell, *Talks with Great Composers* (1995), pp. 9, 13–14, 58). Much scholarly scepticism surrounds Abell’s transcript of this probing of the religious sources of musical inspiration. Nevertheless, even though Brahms, like Bach (except in his Calov Bible annotations), hardly ever spoke of religion, the phrase attributed to him by Abell sounds plausibly in character.