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His ‘Great Passion’

Whatsoever is harmonically composed delights in harmony; which makes me much distrust the symmetry of those heads which declaim against all Church-Musick. For my self, not only for my obedience, but my particular Genius, I do embrace it: for even that vulgar and Tavern-Musick, which makes one man merry, another mad, strikes in me a deep fit of devotion, and a profound contemplation of the First Composer. There is something in it of Divinity more than the ear discovers: it is an Hieroglyphical and shadowed lesson of the whole World, and creatures of GOD; such a melody to the ear, as the whole World, well understood, would afford the understanding. In brief, it is a sensible fit of that harmony which intellectually sounds in the ears of GOD.

– Thomas Browne, *Religio medici* (1642)

Bach's autograph manuscript score of the *Matthew Passion* is a calligraphic miracle. It is by far the most precious survivor of that 'big pile of Passion music'¹ entered into the second catalogue of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's estate in 1805.² Phenomenal elegance and fluency of notation characteristic of Bach in his forties contrasts with passages made in the crabbed, rigid handwriting of his later eye-damaged years, with corrections entered on glued-on strips of paper meticulously inserted. The care and the effort it cost him are everywhere to be seen. In common with a handful of other composers (Rameau, Debussy, Stravinsky) Bach plans every part of the page and leaves a minimum of unused staves, all signs of a resolve to capture every polished detail of this immense creation. Uniquely among his autographs, he uses red ink – but generally only for the Gospel words, which thus stand out from the rest like some medieval missal and from the brown-black sepia that was his norm. Twice in its existence the manuscript has been damaged. Once, in his very last years, Bach himself repaired sections which had frayed through accidental use. Then, during the early years of the Second World War, ominous signs appeared that the paper itself had begun to thin – the gallotannate ink had started to oxidise, making the paper brittle. In 1941, in an ingenious labour of love, the Berlin restorer Hugo Ibscher stretched the finest chiffon silk over each of the damaged pages to hold it in place by means of rice starch. It worked – for quite some time, but now the red ink has begun to fade.

The impression of a meticulously constructed autograph score, worked over, revised, repaired and left in a condition aspiring to some

sort of ideal, is at one with the monumental scale of the work itself. Yet, with only this fair-copy score dating from the mid 1730s and one set of performing parts to go on, generations of Bach scholars have so far been unable to trace the inception, planning or successive stages of the Passion's evolution with any degree of certainty. There are single-part books for the two four-voiced ensembles which identify the tenor and bass lines in Choir 1 as *Evangelista* and *Jesus* respectively, as well as separate copies for the minor characters and the *soprano in ripieno* required for 'O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig', the German *Agnus Dei* in the opening chorus. We do not know exactly who took part in any of the performances given under the composer's direction – neither the make-up of his vocal and orchestral forces, nor their precise number, nor how they were deployed in the western choir loft of the Thomaskirche (though we have a reasonable idea – see [illustration](#)). And we have no contemporary reaction to it – not the smallest shard of evidence of what people thought about it at the time.

So what *can* we say with confidence? From the evidence of the autograph score, that the work is unique in its scope and grandeur, that Bach had an enormous personal investment in its composition, and that he had prepared himself for its unprecedented compositional challenges with typical thoroughness. But that does not begin to account for the overpowering experience of the work in performance. We have already suggested that he had prepared his audience for it by means of unmistakable musical anticipations and adumbrations of theological themes in the cantatas leading up to Good Friday 1725 (see [Chapter 9](#)). There is, as we have also seen, a distinct possibility – but no proof – that the *Matthew Passion* was planned as part of his second annual cycle of Leipzig cantatas, that of 1724/5, sharing with it an emphasis on chosen chorales as the basis or focal point of each cantata. The Passion could have been designed for – and would have fitted perfectly at – its centre, like the boss of a shield. Yet it was not to be: its first airing was delayed by a further two years. We saw how the problems he had completing it in time in 1725 had a knock-on effect on the post-Resurrection cantatas, disrupting the completion of the chorale cantata cycle (see 'Second Leipzig Cycle' diagram, Plate 16). Nevertheless, I believe that we stand to gain in our understanding of the *Matthew Passion* – draw closer to its purpose, its fine braiding together of musical

and theological themes – if we approach it not as an isolated work but from the perspective of that cantata cycle. Bach went on modifying it in the course of the 1730s and 1740s, never as drastically as he did the *John Passion*, but always meticulously and with unflinching resolve. Again, simply from the appearance of the autograph score, we gain the strongest impression of an intention to leave the music in a state that could surpass and outlive its original liturgical function – of an aesthetic entity *sui generis* and entrusted to posterity. This impression is supported by the potency the *Matthew Passion* has had ever since Felix Mendelssohn's famous revival in 1829, and remains undiminished by time.

After two consecutive outings in 1724 and 1725 of the fast-paced *John Passion* in two very different versions, and the controversy that seems to have surrounded that work, Bach appears to have been minded to come up with something which gave his listeners more time to reflect and contemplate between scenes in the Gospel accounts. The acid test for him, then, was whether his new Passion music – conceived on a still grander scale – would hold their attention for over two and a half hours. The very length of the *Matthew Passion* and the complexity of its musical elaboration can be daunting even to those hearing it for the second or third time – and we should not forget, as John Butt points out, that ‘one of the greatest ironies about Bach’s Passions is that their original audiences were far less familiar with the genre than we are; moreover – as is the case with all Bach’s most celebrated music – we might have heard them many more times than did the original performers or even Bach himself.’ This is especially true of the *Matthew Passion*: when approached with the expectations or the memory of the *John Passion* it is easy to be wrong-footed, puzzled – even to feel excluded. As a listener, your primary focus is on the linear progression of the story. Where this is interrupted by extended movements of contemplation, the stop-go nature of the twin timeframes of reported speech and the contemporary response to events can be perplexing. Where are we now? Is this an historical event or a reaction to it? If the latter, by whom: Jesus’ disciples, the ‘Daughter of Zion’, the Christian community or mankind as a whole? And when are things occurring? In the first century AD, in the Lutheran timeframe of the chorale, in the 1720s, 1730s and 1740s of Bach’s Leipzig congregation or in the

present, as they affect us now? Despite the captivating beauty of individual numbers, the overall impression can be one of a juddering rhythm: no sooner are you launched into the story of the betrayal and trial of Jesus than the forward momentum is halted.

One clue to Bach's structure lies in the effectiveness of its pacing, which is comparatively more stately and measured than that of the *John Passion*, and the success of any interpretation hinges on the degree to which it connects to – and replicates – that pacing in performance without loss of dramatic momentum. Individual performers, being wholly caught up in the interpretative challenges of successive movements – those spokes fanning out from the compositional hub – can easily lose sight of the work's overall shape. But if the pacing is right, the listener is helped to take each of the twenty-eight scenes (see below [this page](#)) as it comes, and to re-live and relish the re-telling of it. So, instead of waiting impatiently for an aria to end and the story to resume, we begin to value the voice urging us to identify with the remorse, the outrage and the outpouring of grief articulated by individual spokesmen and women in the course of the drama, and by the entire community voicing its contrition in the chorales. Once as a listener you have adjusted to its structural rhythm and sheer length, Bach's *Matthew Passion* can in some ways be an easier ride than the *John*. There, as we saw, everything is breathlessly dramatic, but also so unremittingly Johannine in its theology: you feel you are being taken by the scruff of the neck (as indeed one is by John's Gospel) and required to confront big issues – the nature of kingship, of identity, or of what happens when truth faces falsehood.

Here in the *Matthew Passion* Bach adopts a less polemical tack, dictated in part by Matthew's approach, and is set on making much more room for the listener to process the drama, giving him time to reflect and to digest. Whereas in the *John Passion* the arias are distributed unevenly – two short ones in rapid succession near the start, a third to provide a shattering conclusion to Part I, the lone peak of 'Erwäge' at the midway point (where time seems to stop before a fast resumption of the drama), and four more clustered towards the end – here he ensures a greater overall sense of regularity and stability. He agrees with (or even instructs) Picander at the outset that most arias should be preceded by an arioso – to form an intermediate stage, as if to

prepare the listener for the contemplative space which the aria will occupy. Now there is enough time to savour the prodigious beauty of each one in turn, the subtle colouring of the obbligato accompaniments, and the expanded range of emotional and meditative response that they encompass. Any diminution of the vivid scene-painting and the inexorable dramatic thrust we relish in the *John Passion* is compensated for in the *Matthew* by Bach's cunning way of personifying these various 'voices' – the allegorical ones who sing arias as well as those caught up in the drama itself (these he often locks in dialogue) – and the way he maintains all these consecutive, almost simultaneous time-shifts in a state of productive tension. The unity of its pacing is one of the *Matthew Passion*'s greatest achievements: Bach knows exactly when and how to modify *da capo* form, when to elide and override the natural breaks in the text by ensuring that there are no false stops, no unnecessary cadential breaks, so that the forward momentum is maintained. Unlike Telemann, who fills in the *da capo* form compliantly and is not particularly concerned about building climaxes, Bach repeatedly reinvented the *da capo* form, much as Mozart and Beethoven were to re-cast the sonata form in endlessly creative ways.

It is Bach's capacity to see all the possibilities of the material simultaneously and to clasp so many threads together at any one time which is so impressive in the *Matthew Passion* – his ability to combine judgements of a practical kind with considerations of structure, theological exegesis and narrative pacing, even down to the particular tone of voice he chooses to adopt when addressing his specific congregation of listeners on this crucial day in the church's calendar. With the liturgy pared down to just a few prayers and hymns to open and close proceedings, and the sermon, for all its considerable length, coming at the midway point, this was the ultimate test for him to justify Luther's great claim for music – that its notes 'make the text come alive'.³ This was his opportunity to show, as the poet Hunold (his former colleague in Cöthen) put it, how 'beautiful music can implant a better impression in people's hearts'.⁴

Inevitably this takes us back to the question of how effective Bach was in holding his listeners' attention: of course they *heard* everything, but did they take the trouble to *listen*? How much did they absorb and how much did they assent to his approach, and how would any of this

have differed from the way their contemporaries reacted to other Passion music elsewhere in Germany or in the Catholic south? Naturally, we have no exact way of knowing. We saw earlier how Leipzigers clung to their old Good Friday rituals – those plainchant meditations and the prolonged strophic hymn-singing – and resisted the fashionable tide of concerted Passion oratorios until late in Kuhnau's cantorship. Within a year of Bach's arrival the Good Friday Vespers service had suddenly turned into the musical highpoint of the year. Bach's *Matthew Passion* was in essence one long *concert spirituel*.^a

In the previous chapter we contrasted the situation in Leipzig with the phenomenal popularity of Brockes's Passion libretto elsewhere in Germany, particularly in the more cosmopolitan ducal courts and mercantile seaports such as Hamburg. We saw how there was no literary device or explicit poetic image that Brockes missed in his graphically realistic evocation of Jesus' pain, nor a rhetorical trick he avoided if it could serve to intensify the listener's response. Yet, even though Bach chose to paraphrase and incorporate some of Brockes's verses in his *John Passion*, his approach was fundamentally different to that of, say, Telemann or Stölzel – not because of any diminution in rhetoric, but because of a greater concentration of musical substance, as exemplified by his *Matthew Passion*. But then his listeners in Leipzig's two main churches were probably of another breed from those who thronged Hamburg's famous Drill Hall, eager to sample the contrasting ways four rival composers had set Brockes's libretto to music. Without even the semblance of liturgical function, there was an element of spectator sport to these successive evenings of 'spiritual' entertainment. In any case, who were these *Stadt Bürger* of Hamburg? It is claimed that they were cultivated, literate and discriminating, 'aware of the Protestant tradition [yet] no longer satisfied by its traditional ecclesiastical form ... no longer blindly accept[ing] religious truths [but] needing to regain them through emotional experience'.⁵ With his urbane Hamburgers, Brockes felt that he was free to play on a phenomenon that would soon characterise much of Enlightenment Europe, fanning the embers of faltering faith through his unabashed emphasis on the physical aspects of the suffering of Jesus, which he describes in lurid detail. The typical *Stadt Bürger* of Leipzig in Bach's day was, by contrast, a more conservative and straightforwardly pious

individual, one who had no need for a high dosage of such psychedelic stimulants. He was dependably to be found in his assigned pew, a member of a self-consciously stratified and provincial urban society. No doubt familiar with all the biblical words and scriptural allusions, and most if not all the chorales that were included in Bach's figural music, in his hands were the *Texts to the Passion Music according to the Evangelist Matthew at the Good Friday Vespers in the Church of St Thomas* by the poet Christian Friedrich Henrici, alias Picander, Bach's most regular literary collaborator.^b

The question, then, is whether our *Stadtürger* was willing to accept and embrace Bach's Passion music in its successive formulations and capable of the prolonged concentration required to come to terms with its complexities. In his autobiography, Pastor Adam Bernd wrote, 'It is said that people are hindered in their devotions by thoughts of wishing to be elsewhere because they didn't know the hymn and couldn't sing along ... Isn't this just a gripe against new-fangled hymns, a citizen once asked on his way home?'⁶ Should we take this at face value or ask whether a feeling of partial exclusion may have been at the root of it? Certainly a work as extended and challenging as either of Bach's two great Passion settings was a feat of endurance for any listener sitting passively on hard wooden benches in an unheated church in late March. Knowing all eight of the different chorale tunes Bach wove into it may have been reassuring, but in any case as a member of the congregation you were not expected to sing along as in the old days (and if you did, you would probably have been a little confused by the strange keys, the sometimes unfamiliar yoking of verse to melody, or by the sheer complexity of Bach's harmonisations).



Without any concession to theatrical gimmickry Bach provides his audience with a magnificent display of dramatic re-enaction. Building on the techniques he used in the *John Passion* and the more dramatic of his church cantatas, Bach approaches his task with the flair of the born dramatist. The Ancient Greeks watched their theatrical rituals from stone theatre benches; Bach's eighteenth-century Saxons sat for almost

three hours in their wooden pews while his musical missiles rained down on them. Just as educated Greeks, intimately familiar with the tragedy of Oedipus – its goriness, its moral outrage and the degree of its hero's affliction and degradation^c could still be gripped by the slow, controlled progression of Sophocles' account as though experiencing it for the first time, so Bach's Leipzig listeners, who knew every inch of the road to Calvary, could still be intensely moved by it. The foundations of the city are laid bare, whether it is Athens in the fifth century BC or Leipzig in the 1720s, in the same ritual acknowledgement of fault, re-told and stabilised through its performance and transformation into art. In the same way that we buy tickets for *King Lear* and come away chastened, sobered and put in our place, so Leipzigers (with their opera house closed for the past six years) flocked to the Thomaskirche on a Good Friday, hoping that the excitement and harrowing uncoiling of the human drama would still hold them in thrall, knowing full well that they would be distressed (and perhaps disappointed if they found they weren't).

The musical score consists of two staves of basso continuo music. The top staff is labeled 'Basso' and the bottom staff 'Cont.' with a dynamic 'p'. The score includes lyrics in German:

Basso: Denn sein Mund, der mit Milch und Honig fließet, hat den Grund und

Cont.: des Leidens herbe Schmach durch den ersten Trunk versüßt;

A reconstruction of the north-west section of the Thomaskirche in Bach's time shows one of the two facing balustraded galleries for the instrumentalists and, to the right, private box pews reserved for the councillors. (Illustration credit 51)

The question was, could Bach's Passion music re-animate the conventions of the Easter story and, by extension, of tragic myth, and re-kindle those 'habits of imagination and symbolic recognition' which are essential to the way music-drama functions?⁷ Performing from the organ gallery at the west end of the church, he and his musicians were only partially in view of the congregation, the singers in the middle divided antiphonally by choir, the winds in a raised gallery to the north,

the strings in the equivalent to the south, responding and listening to each other, and locked in dialectic exchange. The Thomaner were not a troupe of actors, not a circus act, nor of course did they wear masks or theatrical costumes. Yet neither the absence of a stage nor the peculiar architectural configuration of his performing space could disguise the fact that Bach's was essentially dramatic music: music intended to appeal to – even occasionally assault – the senses of his listeners.

From the very beginning Bach had been warned off from writing operatic music,^d yet his purpose was unimpeachable: to re-enact the Passion story within his listeners' minds, to affirm its pertinence to the men and women of his day, addressing their concerns and fears and directing them towards the solace and inspiration to be found within the Passion narrative. As a Lutheran he knew that it was not by acts of contrition, nor by 'good works' nor even by means of the Mass (which Luther described as a 'dragon's tail' – a challenge would have to wait for another day) that the believer could approach or celebrate Christ's sacrifice on his behalf at Calvary; it was by re-living the painful events on each and every anniversary of that sacrifice, something that his music was unsurpassed at helping his listeners to achieve.^e It was a sentiment captured by the chorus in Bach's setting of the words *Drum muss uns sein verdienstlich Leiden / Recht bitter und doch süße sein* ('Thus for us his most worthy passions / must be most bitter and yet sweet' – No. 20). For Bach's *Matthew Passion* moves beyond dogma and far beyond sectarian doctrine, towering above the liturgy that first legitimised its existence.

As with the *John Passion*, primacy is given to the biblical words. Bach balanced the central thread, Matthew's re-telling of the Passion story, with instant reactions and more measured reflections by concerned onlookers, so as to bring it into the present. Like any good story-teller, Bach knew exactly how to play on his listeners' expectations – how to hold them in suspense, how to tell and then re-tell the story from different angles. Like novelists from Flaubert to Arundhati Roy, Bach provides a succession of subjectivities to help the reader / listener to experience the drama from shifting perspectives. In the earlier *Passion* it was John's special eyewitness account that gave the work its authenticity and edge, while the irregular placement of arias and chorales reinforced this suspense. With Matthew's version comes a

larger cast and the added human pathos of Jesus presented as ‘a man of sorrows’. It would be hard to better it as an essentially *human* drama – one involving immense struggle and challenge, betrayal and forgiveness, love and sacrifice, compassion and pity – the raw material with which most people can instantly identify. At times Bach’s music suggests an almost physical engagement with the bones and blood of the story that gives life both to Matthew’s account and to the horrified response of its imagined commentators, so that ‘we tremble, we grow cold, we shed tears, our hearts race, we can barely breathe.’^f

b

What could Bach possibly now produce in his opening movement to match the powerful vision of Christ-in-majesty of his *John Passion*? His vision this time was of a different order, an allegorical one of the faithful climbing Mount Zion on their way to the holy city of Jerusalem. As with so many of the cantatas from his Second Leipzig Cycle, Bach constructs it as a chorale fantasia, but with a throbbing pedal in the style of a French *tombeau*.⁸ One can view it as an *exordium*, a metaphorical ‘lifting up’ in anticipation of the way Christ will soon be hoisted up on the Cross, an appeal to the devout listener to ‘open up’ and, as in Homer, an invocation to the poetic muses. One senses Bach’s wealth of experience in cantata composition that had been crammed into two or three frenetic years, but also his striving to surpass everything that he had previously written. This powerful and evocative lament, reminiscent in its grandiloquent musical gestures of BWV 198, the *Trauer-Ode* (see [Chapter 7, this page](#)), turns out to be a microcosm of the new Passion, encompassing both its particular theological slant and the musical structure that Bach gives each of the ensuing movements. We cannot tell if it was his or Picander’s idea to link the traditional interpretation of Christ as the allegorical bridegroom (Song of Songs) with that of his identity as the sacrificial lamb – ‘He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter ... so he openeth not his mouth’ (Isaiah 53:7). What we do know is that Bach’s starting-point – one that he must have discussed and agreed with Picander at the outset – is the concept of dialogue, a device he had already tried out fruitfully in two

movements of his *John Passion* (between his bass soloist and the remaining singers (see above, [this page](#)), and now developed to the point where it led logically to an eventual division into two choirs, each with its own supporting instrumental ensemble.

Once again, the obvious literary model for this was Brockes's Passion libretto of 1711, which calls for exchanges between 'the Believers' and 'the Daughter of Zion'; yet, interestingly, none of the composers who had set Brockes's text (Keiser, Handel, Telemann, Mattheson or Stölzel) picked up on this opportunity to compose for antiphonal choirs. What is intriguing here is the way Picander, while manifestly influenced by Brockes, switches the pronouns: in place of Brockes's 'Believers' he places 'the [individual] Soul' – to whom he assigns an 'aria' – in an exchange with the 'Daughters of Zion'. Evidently Bach sensed a need to turn this prologue into a *communal* lament – for plural forces, in other words. However it was originally or eventually constituted, Bach intends that his first choir should speak for the whole community of believers – to voice a self-accusation by humanity at large – as well as for the individual soul and for the bride of the Song of Songs, who must forfeit her bridegroom on her wedding day. Meanwhile, the 'Daughters of Zion', sung by his second choir, also appear in his musical treatment to stand for that 'great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him' – those who followed Jesus all the way to Golgotha (Luke 23:27). Implied, but not set to music by Bach, are Jesus' words, 'Weep not for me, but for yourselves and your children.'^g

Viewed in this way, Bach's opening chorus is presented to us as an immense tableau – an aural equivalent, say, to a grand altarpiece by Veronese or Tintoretto – in which, with Albert Schweitzer, we can discern Jesus being led captive through the city and along the *Via crucis*, the voices of the crowd calling to one another in tragic antiphony.⁹ The music seems entirely complete – an architectural structure with a chorale prelude superimposed upon an autonomous four-voiced chorus (Choir I) – and we marvel at how smoothly he makes room for a series of antiphonal exchanges between his two choirs and orchestras. But there is still more to come: at the moment when the first choir refers to Jesus as a 'bridegroom', and then 'as a lamb', Bach brings in a third choir with the chorale 'O Lamb of God, unspotted' in an abrupt expansion of the sound spectrum: G major within an E minor context.^h

Sung in unison by a group of trebles (*soprano in ripieno*) placed in the ‘swallows’ nest’ organ loft in the Thomaskirche – then (but now, alas, no longer) situated a whole nave’s length east of the main performing area – the effect must have been stunning – a magical use of space and acoustic, quite the equal of those celebrated Venetian polychoral antiphonies developed in the late 1500s by Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli to exploit the mysterious spatial configuration of St Mark’s Basilica. Yet Bach’s purpose is not confined to a spatial expansion of sonorities. By choosing to superimpose on to his choral tableau the timeless *Agnus Dei* of the liturgy in its German versification – which would already have been heard earlier that day at the conclusion of the morning service – he was able to contrast the historic Jerusalem as the site of Christ’s imminent trial and Passion with the celestial city whose ruler, according to the Apocalypse, is the Lamb. The repeated acknowledgement of guilt – *auf unsre Schuld* in Choir 1 – is answered down along the Gothic vault by the children – *All Sünd hast du getragen* (‘All sin hast thou borne for us ... have mercy on us, O Jesus’). This is the essential dichotomy – the innocent Lamb of God and the world of errant humanity whose sins Jesus must bear – which will underlie the whole Passion, the fate of the one yoked to that of the other. Bach here gives it an added symbolic tonal form: E minor for the main chorale fantasia, G major for the *Agnus Dei* – distinct, coexisting, colliding, yet never resolved. He has set out his stall. Now the biblical narrative can begin.

From the outset we are offered stark new juxtapositions of texture and sonority – wide-arching *secco* recitative for the narrator, a ‘halo’ of four-voiced strings surrounding each of Jesus’ statements, tense antiphonal interventions by the crowd (sometimes divided, as in No. 4b, between chief priests and scribes), a reduction to single choir for the disciples (No. 4d) and a coming together again for collective prayer. Soon we can discern a series of trifoliar patterns emerging: biblical narrative (in recitative), comment (in arioso) and prayer (in aria). Gradually these begin to take on the appearance of an ordered sequence of discrete scenes, as though borrowed from contemporary opera, each one building towards either an individual (aria) or collective (chorale) response to the preceding narration. Here was ample precedent for dividing up the Gospel narrative into separate ‘acts’. Johann Jacob

Bendeler, for example, proposed a division of Matthew's account into six principal 'actions':¹⁰ the preparation of the Passion; the Garden (*Actus hortus*); the Sanhedrin trial (*Actus pontifices*); the Roman trial (*Actus Pilatus*); the Crucifixion (*Actus crux*); the Burial (*Actus sepulchrum*). Although Bach's autograph indicates no such clear-cut subdivisions, this may be a helpful way of tracing the Passion's structural outline – as one would a *tragédie lyrique* by Bach's French contemporary, Rameau, one comprising a prologue and five acts, each divided into scenes:ⁱ

Part I

EXORDIUM

Chorus: ‘Kommt, ihr Töchter’ No. 1

PROLOGUE – The preparation of the Passion (Matthew 26:1–29)

Sc. i	Jesus foretells his Crucifixion	Nos. 2–3
Sc. ii	The plot to kill Jesus	Nos. 4a–4b
Sc. iii	The anointing at Bethany	Nos. 4c–6
Sc. iv	Judas' betrayal	Nos. 7–8
Sc. v	The preparation of the Passover	Nos. 9a–10
Sc. vi	The Last Supper	Nos. 11–13

ACT I – ACTUS HORTUS – ‘The Garden Act’ (Matthew 26:30–56)

Sc. i	The Mount of Olives I	Nos. 14–15
Sc. ii	The Mount of Olives II	Nos. 16–17
Sc. iii	Gethsemane: Jesus warns his disciples	Nos. 18–20
Sc. iv	The Agony in the Garden I: Jesus' first appeal to God	Nos. 21–3
Sc. v	The Agony in the Garden II: Jesus' second appeal to God	Nos. 24–5
Sc. vi	Jesus' betrayal and arrest	Nos. 26–27a
Sc. vii	The dispersal of the flock	Nos. 28–9

THE SERMON

Part II

EXORDIUM

Aria: ‘Ach! nun ist mein Jesus hin!’ No. 30

ACT II – ACTUS PONTIFICES – ‘The High Priests’ Act’ (Matthew 26:57–75)

Sc. i	Jesus before Caiaphas	Nos. 31–2
Sc. ii	Deposition by false witnesses	Nos. 33–5
Sc. iii	False accusation and mockery	Nos. 36a–37
Sc. iv	Peter’s denial	Nos. 38a–40

ACT III – ACTUS PILATUS – ‘Pilate’s Act’ (Matthew 27:1–29)

Sc. i	Judas’ remorse	Nos. 41a–42
Sc. ii	Jesus before Pilate	Nos. 43–4
Sc. iii	Pilate confronts the mob	Nos. 45a–46
Sc. iv	Pilate’s dilemma	Nos. 47–9
Sc. v	Pilate succumbs to the mob’s demands	Nos. 50a–52
Sc. vi	Jesus’ mock coronation	Nos. 53a–54

ACT IV – ACTUS CRUX – ‘The Act of the Cross’ (Matthew 27:30–50)

Sc. i	Via Dolorosa	Nos. 55–7
Sc. ii	Golgotha	Nos. 58a–60
Sc. iii	The death of Jesus	Nos. 61a–62

ACT V – ACTUS SEPULCHRUM – ‘The Act of the Sepulchre’ (Matthew 27:51–60)

Sc. i	Earthquake and revelation	Nos. 63a–65
Sc. ii	The entombment of Jesus	Nos. 66a–66c

CONCLUSIO

Recit.: ‘Nun ist der Herr zur Ruh gebracht’	No. 67
Chorus: ‘Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder’	No. 68

As with Baroque opera, each ‘act’ implies a scene-shift or change of location and a shuffling of the principal players. The individual ‘scenes’ into which Bach appears to divide the five ‘acts’ of Matthew’s narration are of variable length. For example, the purely narrative element in the

fourth scene of the *Actus Pilatus* – the turning-point of Part II, when Jesus' fate hangs in the balance – is a mere two bars long (No. 47). But for him each 'scene' evidently required some punctuation and comment, as though he, as an implicated onlooker, had temporarily to avert his eyes from the action: sufficient time for him – and for us – to ponder its implications. These were the critical junctures at which he enlisted Picander: to gloss the long Passion story with poetic reflections with which the congregation could easily identify, and then to fill those reflections with contemplative music or to round off the scenes with a chorale at moments (there are fourteen in all) when Bach considered a congregational reflection was apposite. In this way his listeners could assent or respond to the feelings expressed by the singer in the previous number by means of reassessing hymns with which they were familiar.

The type and mood of the contemplative commentary inserted by Picander and set to music by Bach vary enormously, both in tracing the way of the Cross and at the same time in articulating the three stages of Luther's 'Meditation on Christ's Passion': first, recognition and acknowledgement of sin; second, the growth of faith through love and the unburdening of one's sins in Christ; and third, seeing Jesus' Passion as the model for Christian love.¹¹ Thus the opening arioso / aria pairing in Part I – 'Du lieber Heiland, du' (No. 5), followed by 'Buß und Reu' (No. 6) – establishes the emphasis on guilt not in an abstract way external to the action, but in response to the disciples' bickering over the 'waste' of precious ointment. Even at so early a stage Bach succeeds in bringing the action and reaction into the present, bolstering the sense of guilt (*Buß*) and remorse (*Reu*) by the contours of the aria's melodic line – short epigrammatic phrases with variable emphases, having little in common with the flutes' ritornello, indeed giving the impression of being a spontaneous response to it. Bach finds an initial means to impart the crunching (*knirscht*) of body and spirit that will become such a feature of his *Matthew Passion*.

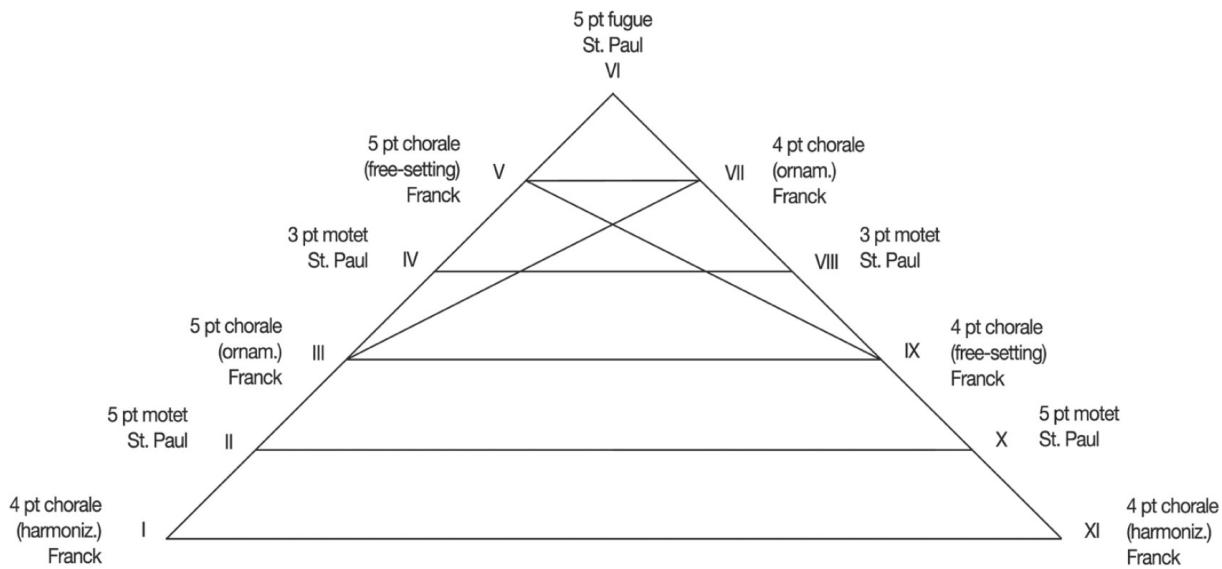
The second aria, 'Blute nur' (No. 8), points to the direct connection between Jesus' innocence and suffering and the way man has been instrumental in his betrayal. It takes up the theme of the sacrificial Lamb of the opening chorus – of innocent blood spilt – and adds to this the image of the serpent suckled at a mother's breast. The figure of Judas, a leader in the community and a favoured friend of Jesus poised

to betray him, is implied, but so are all of us by association. The third interpolation, in total contrast, moves from tears at the prospect of Jesus' imminent departure (the arioso 'Wiewohl', No. 12) to gratitude for the institution of the Eucharist (the aria 'Ich will dir', No. 13). Fittingly, it is the only genuinely joyful music in the Passion; it is also overtly sexual in its imagery – the idea of merging or 'sinking myself into thee.'

The fourth pairing – 'O Schmerz' (No. 19) and 'Ich will bei meinem Jesus wachen' (No. 20) – comes at the midpoint of Part I and again is constructed as a dialogue. Responding to Jesus' injunction at Gethsemane to watch and pray, the tenor stands for the night watchman – observing Jesus' tortured soul and determined to stay vigilant (just as generations of Bach's ancestors had done professionally as *Türmer*). Yet, as the answering soft-voiced chorus makes clear, he is helpless and cannot alleviate the burden of sin, which, Luther insisted, mankind places on Jesus' shoulders through faith in his resurrection. This imbues it with a mysterious quality, almost as though a muted drama is taking place at a distance from the main action – Christ's 'Agony in the Garden' and his acceptance of his role as Saviour.

The fifth pair (Nos. 22 and 23), a reaction to Jesus' agonised appeal to his Father to be spared the cup, voices the believer's eagerness to participate in Christ's suffering and to accept Luther's injunction to follow the way of the Cross. Bitterness and sweetness – of taste and experience – are juxtaposed; but, in accepting to drink from the 'cup of death's bitterness', Jesus renders it sweet and offers it to humanity at large. The aria's melodic line lurches in intoxicated imitation of the chalice draught: with here a yodel-like upward seventh, there a chain of drunken emphases on a single word (*gerne* / 'gladly'), and a constantly shifting beat swinging across the bar-line, it barely stays within the proprieties of Baroque gracefulness. But it does divert our attention from the banality of Picander's rhyming couplet, provided, that is, the singer flows through Bach's crafty hemiolas and ignores the poet's line-divisions: *Gerne will ich mich bequemen, / Kreuz und Becher anzunehmen* ('Gladly will I, fear disdaining, / Drink the cup without complaining'). The B section of the aria irons out some of the earlier inebriated irregularities (apart from *des Leidens herbe Schmach* / 'sorrow's bitter

taste'), but throws a fresh challenge to the singer to inflect the melody without losing the overall triple-rhythmed shape and line (see above).



Square brackets have been added to highlight Bach's way of swinging the beat across the bars in order to preserve the correct verbal emphasis. (illustration credit 52)

Part I culminates with the third strategically placed dialogue, 'So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen' (No. 27a). Here the cello and bass – the bedrock of the music – are silent, leaving the upper strings as the *bassetchen* to portray the stumbling and faltering steps of Jesus, nudged and prodded by the armed pressgang all the way from Gethsemane towards the courtroom, where he will shortly face trial by the Sanhedrin. The soprano and alto of Choir 1 join in a desolate lament for the captive (and in so doing indulge in that 'wrong way to meditate on the Passion' against which Luther warned), while an eerie conjunction of flute and oboe in mixed pairings enact an obsessive circling overhead like dragonflies. The open texture of the music allows one to pick out the disciples (Choir 2) in the middle distance moving from tree to tree through the darkened olive grove, affronted but impotent, not daring to intervene, but bold enough to voice from time to time their muttered protest – to stop molesting Jesus.

This bleak, spellbinding tableau runs counter to the Baroque doctrine which allows for only a single *Affekt* to be portrayed at any one time. Rather than engineer a collision, Bach sets his two unequally constituted ensembles to work on different planes simultaneously, their two *Affekts* being offset in sophisticated dynamic tension like two

separate planets rotating on different trajectories around the same sun. Their opposition is thrown into relief the moment both ensembles, now equal and at full strength, converge and unite to voice the outrage of the whole Christian community at Jesus' capture: 'Sind Blitze, sind Donner' (No. 27b). With its quick-fire exchanges calling on the forces of nature to erupt and destroy Judas and the High Priests' mob, this is double-choir writing of bristling excitement and power. While it could be said to spring from the Venetian tradition of *cori spezzati*, no German composer had come up with anything like this since the days of Hans Leo Hassler and Schütz in the previous century. It is characteristic of the amazing vigour and amplitude Bach brings to his double-choir writing even in quite short *turba* choruses depicting the threat of mob violence (No. 4b), the hideous reality of it (Nos. 45b and 50b), and the cold-blooded mocking of its principal victim (No. 58b).

Having introduced the preceding dialogue with the words 'after Jesus' capture', Picander, in his printed libretto – which includes none of Matthew's words (assumed to be familiar) nor any of the chorales except those woven into his verse – ends at this point. One musicologist muses 'what an enormous effect this savage chorus would have made had it come at the very end of the first part',¹² which is certainly true; ending *Don Giovanni* at the conclusion of the banqueting scene might have had (and can have) a similar effect. But this is not a 'curtain' as in real staged opera, and I doubt whether Bach would have been seriously tempted to conclude Part I in this way. In the church cantatas he composed in Leipzig, and indeed in his *John Passion*, his usual practice was to end with a prayer – a chorale to focus the mind on all that has happened so far – and that is exactly what he does here. Besides, there was an extended speech by Jesus at this juncture in response to a physical intervention by his disciples (the incident of Peter and Malchus' ear), after which Matthew concludes with the line 'Then all the disciples forsook him and fled.' If Bach had even momentarily wavered from setting this line at the conclusion of Part I, the preacher would surely have brought him quickly to order, for that might often have constituted his sermon text – the scattering of the flock.^j Bach's initial musical bridge to the sermon was a straightforward harmonisation of the chorale 'Jesum lass ich nicht von mir'. When he came to revise and copy out the score in the mid 1730s, he must have

seen that this fell a long way short of balancing the structural mass of his opening chorus after the emphatic double-choir movement ‘Sind Blitze, sind Donner’. Now came the decision to replace it with the far more elaborate chorale fantasia, a setting of Sebald Heyden’s Passiontide hymn ‘O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß’ (No. 29). A matching pillar to the grand chorale prologue was now in place, and as a conclusion to Part I it provided the ideal meditative opportunity for the Christian community to unite in contrition, drawing out Luther’s meaning of the Passion story and acting as a direct response to Jesus’ last words about ‘fulfilling’ the Scriptures. Outwardly the ‘fit’ seems perfect and is confirmed by little details such as the fluttering semiquavers in the flutes to illustrate the scattering of the flock. Just at the point where the preacher mounts the pulpit stair, the ‘flock’ disappears from view as the music trails off into the ether. Bach’s tact on this occasion ensures a seamless join to the Good Friday sermon.

For years every scholar assumed this chorus to be an integral part of the *Matthew Passion*, yet it was in fact skilfully shoe-horned into it nine years after its first performance, having originated – at the very least – some ten years before that. There is nothing intrinsically odd about his desire to find a new home for one of the grandest and most impressive of his chorale fantasias, one that would be validated in its new position. Not many of us are disturbed, for example, by the frequent side-by-side placing in the *B minor Mass* of movements whose provenance is separated by thirty years or more (as we shall see in [Chapter 13](#)). Nonetheless, despite the details that suggest its appropriateness here, in the context of the *Matthew Passion*, where the music in its variety of forms is of phenomenal stylistic coherence, this chorale fantasia draws attention to itself. Each time I conduct the Passion I sense a structural shift at this point, a momentary change of gears: it lasts only a few seconds and then all is well again.^k



With the resumption of music after the sermon, it takes a second or two to realise where we have got to in the story. Superficially nothing appears to have changed. The scene is still Gethsemane, now after

nightfall. The Daughter of Zion is found distractedly searching for her captured lover, though Jesus, bound hand and foot, has long since gone, taken to face trial in front of the High Priests. To understand why this allegorical figure is re-introduced at this point by Bach and Picander, we need to remind ourselves of the huge appeal to their audiences of the imagery of the Song of Songs and the vigour of the tradition (which goes back to Origen in the first half of the third century AD) by which the male and female spouses symbolise Christ and the Christian soul. The palpably erotic language of the Song of Songs had long been legitimised by the Roman church, was adopted enthusiastically by the Protestant reformers in the guise of an *unio mystica*, and had been extremely popular with composers for the past 150 years in both Italy and Germany (see pp. 35 and 76). The Daughter of Zion equates with the bride of Christ and symbol of the Christian church, while the soul (*anima*) passionately yearns for union with Christ. The day of their wedding is the first day of Christ's Passion – the day on which he demonstrated his willingness to become the sacrificial offering in atonement for man's sins. This is why the Daughter of Zion figures in the prologue to both parts of the *Matthew Passion*: so that the contemporary believer could grasp that his own thwarted love for the suffering figure of Jesus is his lot or fortune (*sein Glück*). The dialogue movements (which are strategically placed throughout the *Matthew Passion*) articulate this perceived need for a coherent relationship to Christ, even if it means losing him now to regain him later in another form. So, in this new exordium (No. 30), the role of the second chorus questioning the distraught bride in words borrowed from the Song of Songs (6:1) – ‘Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women?’ – is to proffer comfort on behalf of the community of believers. Their music is madrigalian, light and amiable in contrast with the sobbing anguish of the alto soloist's reference to her ‘lamb [caught] in a tiger's claws’. Again, Bach has found a clever way of combining dual *Affekts* of drastically different character, yet linked by an identical dance metre in triple time.¹

With the action now shifted to the Sanhedrin court, Bach can no longer rely on John's eyewitness account, but succeeds nonetheless in bringing the trial and its blatant miscarriage of justice vividly into the present via the tenor arioso ‘Mein Jesus schweigt’ (No. 34) and its

sequel, the aria ‘Geduld!’ (No. 35). Jesus’ silence in answer to his accusers is reflected in the thirty-nine ominous detached beats of the oboes, which allude to the second line of Psalm 39 – ‘I will keep a muzzle on my mouth, so long as wicked men confront me’ – after which they too fall silent. With just continuo for support, the focus shifts to an individual bystander (the tenor Concertist) in his battle for self-control. Denied the calm needle-stitch of the cello’s opening bar for his own melody, he begins with self-admonishment – with a vocal phrase that sounds more like an anguished outcry than the start of an aria. ‘Patience!’ he tells himself with his very first word (*Geduld!*), only to lose it the very next moment as ‘false tongues sting me.’ The melodic line lurches in and out of a recitative-like naturalism with moments of passing lyricism, wholly independent from – yet reactive to – the cello pursuing its own private tussle between forbearance (steady quaver pairings) and protest (jagged dotted rhythms). The energy of Bach’s invention leaps off the page in every single phrase and varied sub-phrase of the voice line – something that in performance a smoothed-out or anodyne delivery by the singer can quickly snuff out. Bach allows us to experience and identify with this struggle between moral outrage and the tactical imperative to remain silent as it continues to churn within the tenor’s mind – even in the vocal rests and particularly in the premature return of his opening plea, *Geduld!* (bars 39–43), and the way his final outburst seems to subside resignedly. This dual portrayal of Jesus’ stoicism and the bystander’s struggle with himself to emulate it seems psychologically astute and extraordinarily modern. It has a resonance for beleaguered humanity at all times and in all places – from instances of false accusation in private or domestic life to the outrages under regimes of torture – and perhaps goes some way to explain the symbolic importance attached to the *Matthew Passion* in the German-speaking world throughout the twentieth century.

But, aside from this, there seems to be a special edge to this particular aria that goes beyond the formally illustrative or exegetical. In his copy of the Calov Bible, Bach singles out two verses from Matthew (5:25–6) to underline: ‘Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.’ Bach, as we

have seen, had direct experience of imprisonment, and by the time he had finished writing out the score of the *Matthew Passion* in 1736, he was battle-scarred from successive professional disputes with the Leipzig authorities. Extraordinarily pertinent here are the words and passages he picked out from Calov on Matthew's verses on the distinction between anger on your own behalf and anger in defence of your office (see [Chapter 6, this page](#)). They are a sign of those tussles of conscience which this aria exemplifies so poignantly: anger suppressed but always close to the surface, bursting out in the cello's dotted figure, the singer's plea for *Geduld* uttered through gritted teeth. The underlinings confirm what we hear in the music: taken together they provide us with rare insights into Bach's private struggles and leave us clues to his temperament.

Coming at the climax of what we have designated 'The High Priests' Act', the next pair of arias (Nos. 39 and 42) gives expression to the essential difference between Christian repentance and remorse: in the first, extreme contrition is sung as though from a kneeling position, and in the second it is delivered with vehement hand-wringing. While they are closely associated with the two disciples Peter and Judas, who, in their separate ways, have both denied Jesus, the singers assigned by Bach to these roles in the narrative do not actually perform 'their' arias and are absent from the High Priest's courtyard. Peter, for example, is a bass, but his guilt is transferred to another singer – an alto – for 'his' aria, as though to underscore the Lutheran idea that as individuals we are *all* culpable and fallible. Although Judas and the singer who sings 'his' aria are both basses, the aria occurs after Judas' suicide. Bach was very particular about this, even writing Judas' direct speech into a separate part-book for a singer who stands aside from the rest and never appears in any of the arias or choruses. The bass singer of the aria acts as an intermediary – binding the listener into the story's progress urging him to identify with the issues of loyalty and betrayal and to extrapolate subjectively their meaning for himself.¹³

Bach makes much of the polarity between the two arias, even as regards the style and tonality of these concerto-like movements and the way they are placed within the narrative. Emerging out of the Evangelist's poignant melisma that re-creates Peter's weeping in the audience's present time, the solo violin enters with the eight-bar

introduction to ‘Erbarme dich’ (No. 39) and wordlessly extends the identification with Peter’s state, exposing the nerve-endings of grief, sorrow and repentance with ineffable tenderness. In a lilting *siciliano* rhythm, the violin floats above the sustained *cantabile* of the middle strings and over a pulsating bass line (organ continuo with pizzicato cello and bass), but with passing appoggiaturas that grind against the unornamented versions of the same note in the vocal line. The only times we hear this haunting melody actually complete are when it is played by the solo violin; we expect the singer to follow suit, but, having essayed the opening gesture, the voice line heads off in another direction, returning with a simplified echo – a mere shadow of the decorously embellished violin tune. Bach has found an audible symbol of human frailty – a falling short, just as Peter, when accused, has just fallen at the first hurdle. As Naomi Cumming explains, ‘Language is not essential to this moment, or even adequate to it. A verbal penitence is expressed by the alto voice, but the violin articulates a more universal distress.’¹⁴ It is this raw expression of human failings that makes ‘Erbarme dich’ so compelling, so heartbreaking – those brave attempts in which an alto voice (speaking in the first person without revealing who he or she is, but with whom we can identify) seeks to emulate the violin and join its line, yet manages just segments of the melody (for it lies outside the alto’s vocal compass). The emotional tug of Bach’s music on the listener springs from a recognition of those dashed dreams and failed endeavours to live up to a Godlike ideal.

In the starkest of contrasts ‘Gebt mir meinen Jesum wieder’ (No. 42) is an outburst of Christian remorse to match that of Judas: a peremptory demand for the release of the captive Saviour by the very man who betrayed him. A robust Italianate concerto movement in G major, it, too, is highly charged emotionally, but in a more pictorial way. The violin *bariolage* seems to trace the motion of Judas’ wrist as in self-disgust he flings down on the Temple floor coins that have been devalued – thirty notes for thirty pieces of silver. For once in the Passion the singer behaves conventionally at first, entering with the same melody as the violin ritornello, but is soon launched into Picander’s second phrase, *Seht, das Geld, den Mörderlohn* (‘See the price, the murderer’s wage’). This properly belongs to the B section of this, the most succinct aria of the Passion, though we are still in the A section (so

that technically this becomes a ‘through-composed’ aria). We can dismiss this as yet another instance of Bach finding his own reasons to play fast and loose with the accepted symmetry of the *da capo* form, until we realise that this particular brand of subversion aptly expresses the disorientation that underlies Judas’ – and our – distress at the consequences of blood money.

We cannot fail to be struck by the juxtaposition of unpalatable hectoring and violence, first in the two almost adjacent mocking choruses (Nos. 36b and d) and then in the ensuing chorale (No. 37), where Bach finds the means to take the sting out of the aggression by interjecting great tenderness and quiet outrage at the maltreatment of a blameless prisoner. Later, after the chilling shout of *Barrabam!* and the first of the blood-lust choruses, ‘Lass ihn kreuzigen!’ (No. 45b), he requires his singers to switch – with only a minim’s rest – from acting as a vindictive hysterical mob to voicing the anguished bemusement of the faithful community of believers (No. 46). One could interpret this as just a filling out of the established structure, or one could see it as Bach’s resolve to keep something much darker at bay – to prevent the level of blood-lust from welling up beyond the point of endurance. Bach finds the ideal way to lance the boil – by a heartfelt expression of contrition voiced in a chorale (No. 46) by the united chorus on the listener’s behalf and as an admission of complicity in the crime: ‘How awe-inspiring is indeed this punishment ... The master pays the debts his servants owe him, and they betray him!'

Occupying a central place akin to that of the ‘rainbow’ aria (‘Erwäge’) in the *John Passion*, is the soprano aria ‘Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben’ (No. 49). It provides a phenomenally poignant and meditative contrast to the coiled-up tension of the Roman trial, which has now arrived at its turning-point. Cowed by the mob’s insistence that he release Barrabas and crucify Jesus, Pilate has been alerted to the dangers of becoming embroiled in Jesus’ trial by his wife’s presentiments, and lamely asks, ‘Why, what evil hath he done?’ The silence lasts a mere crotchet’s rest, but in that time (and before the crowd can find the voice to renew its blood-lust) the soprano steps forward and in measured recitation insists that ‘He has done good to us all’ (No. 48). An air of timeless healing and benediction emanates from the music of this most sublime of arias and acts as an oasis of temporary

sanity in a deranged world. Bach's acute sense of instrumental colour guides him towards an unusual choice of instruments – using twin oboes da caccia to underpin the plangent exchanges between voice and flute. Their weightless pulse allows the ethereal grace of the flute arabesques to fly free and simultaneously to cushion the pure timbre and fragility of the soprano. These tenor-ranged oboes featured first in the *accompagnato* (No. 19) describing Jesus' tortured soul in Gethsemane, when they were doubled by recorders, before yielding to the soprano-ranged oboe with its more forthright sonority appropriate for the watchman's call (No. 20). By giving increased prominence to these 'hunting oboes' as the Passion advances, Bach creates an association in the listener's mind with the dual ideas of suffering and love – not love in the abstract, but as here in 'Aus Liebe', the supreme protective love of Jesus that shields the believer from the wages of sin; the power of evil cannot touch those who repent even in the last moments before death, when passing from searing pain to serenity. In the absence of the habitual basso continuo, the hypnotic throbbing of the da caccias serves to isolate Jesus' message from the baying of his persecutors. These vital components can be overwhelming in performance – the sense of love being present yet also vulnerable, especially at the point where the mob bursts in again with redoubled brutality – 'surely one of the most disturbing moments in the history of western music'.¹⁵

The next interpolated pairs provide emotional responses to Jesus' degradation – his scourging (Nos. 51 and 52) and the carrying of his Cross (Nos. 56 and 57), each seen from a fresh angle. Both feature pervasive dotted rhythms but in patterns so different that any underlying similarity is obscured: harsh whiplashes in the recitative (No. 51) (not dissimilar to Handel's 'He gave his back to the smiters', the B section of 'He was despised' from *Messiah*) that melt into convulsive sobs in its sequel, the alto aria 'Können Tränen' (No. 52). Then the full range of the seven-stringed viola da gamba encompasses the depth of human sorrow and the tottering gait of Jesus burdened by the weight of the Cross. Even if many of the original audience could not actually see the physical appearance of the gambist's extravagant, effortful string crossings, they could have heard them in the sound, with all the struggling arpeggiations, the many cross figures keeping the

listener's mind focused on the symbol of the Cross and on the figure of Simon of Cyrene. Once again, the preparatory ariosi in each pairing provide invitations to us – via individual singers who speak for us – to intervene, even to protest, in an attempt to bring events to a standstill so as to spare Jesus from so much suffering, whereas in the arias the singer seems to take a step backwards and contemplate the events from a more oblique perspective.

This is a major departure from Bach's normal practice in his cantatas, a proto-cinematic technique in which he engineers an abrupt shift of focus from the narrative to the commentator elbowing his way into the frame, then softening and widening as the arioso dissolves into the ensuing aria. In the case of 'Erbarm es Gott!' (No. 51) it is not just the hard edge to the rhythms which softens the bridge to the aria 'Können Tränen', but the extreme instability of the underlying harmony, made up of chains of seventh chords, which veers from sharps to flats, back to sharps and (just when you expect a final cadence in F \sharp minor) makes a last-minute enharmonic swerve to flats – to G minor. Picander's arioso text refers to a 'vision of such pain' (*der Anblick solchen Jammers*). The visual impact of violin and viola bows lashing the strings adds greatly to Bach's evocative portrayal of Jesus' scourging, putting one in mind of Caravaggio's *Flagellation of Christ* (Naples, 1607), in which the soldiers' muscles are tense with the effort of strapping him to a column.

As the *Passion* moves towards its climax, Bach's strategy of pulling us into the action (in ariosi), and then arranging the angles from which we can contemplate its application to ourselves (in the arias and chorales), becomes ever clearer. By settling on a specific voice and selecting a specific obbligato timbre for each aria – whether solo violin, flute, oboe or viola da gamba – he determines the most appropriate accompaniment: this might be for the full string ensemble from either left or right, or subtle combinations of sonorities, as we saw when the oboes da caccia struck up such a fruitful and intriguing partnership with both soprano and flute in 'Aus Liebe'. In the preceding arioso the two oboes da caccia were centre-stage and then moved into a more subservient role once the aria began. With these arioso/aria pairings, for all their apparent oppositions of mood, the chosen instrumental timbre is the common denominator: a linking of voice and narrative thread. The kaleidoscopic permutations of instrumental colour that

Bach finds seem to be boundless. So, for example, although the flutes occupy the foreground in ‘Ja freilich’ (No. 56), the viola da gamba – which will be the solo obbligato instrument in ‘Komm, süßes Kreuz’ (No. 57) – is already present, discreetly arpeggiating in the background. It is also intriguing in theatrical terms to observe how Bach has evolved a fluid movement of instrumental *dramatis personae* jockeying for position, ready to advance or retreat, or simply awaiting their turn. The moment a ‘bit part’ player steps forwards he or she suddenly assumes an enhanced significance as the context shifts. Then, when a dialogue is struck up with another player or singer, we, as listeners, gain a vivid sense of separate human subjectivities locked in animated dialogue just as we might encounter on the pages of a novel.

Now, with the crisis of the Crucifixion – which really *is* a crisis here, not the triumphant ‘raising up’ we witness in Bach’s setting of John’s Gospel – the oboes da caccia rise to a position of prominence in the pairing ‘Ach Golgotha’ (No. 59) and ‘Sehet, Jesus hat die Hand’ (No. 60). Their initial impact as they imitate the sombre tolling of funeral bells – not the light, high-pitched variety, the *Leichenglocken* we will encounter in the mourning cantatas (see [Chapter 12](#)), but dark sonorous ones in a jangled peal – is the first Christian response of protest to the Crucifixion and the curse (*Fluch*) of Jesus’ imminent death. The twisted harmonic convolutions of this extraordinary recitative, part of the awkward modulatory shift from E minor (*Ich bin Gottes Sohn*) to E³ major (*Sehet*), press home the Lutheran message of human guilt being the root cause whereby the ‘guiltless have to die guilty’.

With the start of the aria now in the serenity of E³ major, the mood shifts from the horror of Golgotha to one of pastoral benediction, turning the earlier ‘curse’ into a blessing. It is hard to say quite how the ominous bell-tolling sonority of the da caccias has suddenly become congenial, even radiant. Now for the first time they are displayed in their full glory as melody instruments – the epitome of the love emanating from the Cross and from Jesus’ outstretched arms that offer a haven to the sinner, gathering in the faithful like ‘lost chicks’ (*ihr verlass’nen Küchlein*).^m Here the exoticism of the da caccia timbre lies not in the long stretches of euphony in which they glide together over a staccato bass line, but in the bars (2–4) in which they launch into trill-decorated ascents and quirky syncopations – perhaps in anticipation of

those abandoned chicks soon to be enfolded, but also redolent of Near Eastern instruments that exploit the cavity resonance of their flared brass bells (see [this page](#) and Plate 21). The transformation in sonority from arioso to aria is of course not haphazard but reflects the change from guilt to love in which Bach, following Luther, draws out the principal benefits of faith to the believer. This is to underscore that ‘comfort to the conscience’ (*Tröstung des Gewissens*) in the Passion story which the Daughter of Zion points out to the community (Chorus 2): *in Jesu Armen sucht Erlösung, nehmt Erbarmen, Suchet!* (‘Seek redemption in Jesus’ arms, receive mercy, seek!’).

After the anguish of the Crucifixion these floating exhortations of both singer and da caccias exude warmth and balm. But the ultimate validation of these rather magical instruments and the special role that Bach assigns to them in the Passion comes in the final aria, ‘Mache dich, mein Herze, rein’ (No. 65), when they are re-absorbed into the orchestra, adding a burnished gentle colouring to the halo of string sound associated hitherto with Jesus and now with this aria (in Bach’s performances the singers of both were one and the same).ⁿ The voice line is all of a piece both with the instrumental material presented at the outset and with its texture – Christ’s death, having brought atonement, is now entombed in the believer’s heart. The aria is in itself a celebration of the transforming potency of music as a means to reflect on, and draw lessons from, the re-telling of the Passion story. As the only conventionally functioning *da capo* aria in the *Matthew Passion*, it is both exuberant and calming by turn, spacious yet onward flowing, and is one of the most inherently satisfying and consoling arias in all Bach’s works. There is one remarkable skittish bar (52) – the bridge back to the A section – which seems to sum up the preceding message, ‘World, begone, let Jesus in’, in a moment of unalloyed joy.

Though the story of Christ’s entombment and the imposing double chorus for a deputation of High Priests and Pharisees sent to lobby Pilate is still to come, this magnificent bass aria marks the beginning of the end. The last notes are performed in an accompanied recitative for four solo voices perhaps representing the four Gospel-writers searching for an elegiac summing-up of their personal testimony, like family mourners. The second choir’s response is folk-like in its simple valediction in preparation for the sacral dance of the epilogue. Where in

the *John Passion*, Bach ended with a choral rondo ('Ruht wohl') as a reverential accompaniment to the laying of the Saviour's body in the grave – and therefore suggestive of a full stop of a sort – here, to conclude the *Matthew*, he chooses a sarabande similar in motivic gesture and key to the one in BWV 997, the Suite in C minor. The sensation is one of continuous movement, as though the entire ritual of the Passion story has now been heard in the listener's conscience and will need to be re-lived every Good Friday hereafter. A final reminder of this comes in the unexpected and almost excruciating dissonance Bach inserts over the very last chord: the melody instruments insist on B³₄ – the jarring leading tone – before eventually melting in a C minor cadence.



Looking back at the conclusion of the *Matthew Passion*, one is struck by how the character of Jesus – a much more human figure than the one portrayed in the *John Passion* – is delineated powerfully and subtly, even when reduced, as in the whole of Part II, to three lapidary utterances: his final *Eli, Eli, lama asabthani?* ('My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?') and prior to that *Du sagest's* ('Thou hast said') – once to Caiaphas, once to Pilate. Other than that, Matthew tells us, 'he answered him nothing.' Yet there isn't a single moment when we are unaware of his presence. How can this be? Bach gives such a strong imprint to his interventions – always (apart from that very last cry from the Cross) with their distinctive nimbus of string sounds – that from early on (the instigation of the Eucharist during the Last Supper and the Agony in the Garden in Part I) his presence never ceases to loom over the narration; indeed, it is constantly insisted upon by references to him in reported speech and still more by the way the arioso/aria singers invoke it. We see him reflected in the eyes and voices of others, most of all in the moving summation 'Truly this was the Son of God' (63b) – two of the most emotionally charged bars in all of Bach's œuvre, in which the music magnifies Christ's presence at the very moment of his physical absence/disappearance. As always, the music is the place to find Bach himself too. Much as his whole endeavour is to give a voice to others – the protagonists, the crowd, the Gospel writer – his own is

always present in the story. We hear it in his fervour, in his empathy with the suffering of the innocent Christ, in his sense of propriety, in his choices and juxtapositions of narrative and commentary, and most of all in the abrupt way he stems the tide of vengeful hysteria, cutting into Matthew's narration and interrupting it with a chorale expressive of profound contrition and outrage.¹⁵

There is not a single *opera seria* of the period that I have studied or conducted to compare with Bach's two Passions, in terms of the intense human drama and moral dilemma that he expresses in such a persuasive and deeply poignant way. No other German Passion oratorio or a single opera that has come down to us from these years can compare with them as sustained music-drama. Of that brilliant Class of '85, only Handel, vastly experienced composer of operas that he was, showed in the glorious succession of biblically inspired dramas he composed in the 'Oratorio Way' for London audiences between 1737 and 1752 that he was capable of producing persuasive dramatic masterpieces away from the stage and in a theatre of his own imagination. Bach knew perfectly well what opera was and seems to have decided quite early in life that it wasn't for him. What most distinguishes his Passions from operas of the time is the way he does away with the convention of a fixed point of reference for the audience, rejecting the idea of a listener who surveys the development of the dramatic narrative more like a consumer – entertained, perhaps moved, ingesting spoon-fed images, but never a part of the action. Bach took his cue from Luther, who, knowing from direct experience what it was like to be persecuted, insisted that Christ's Passion 'should not be acted out in words or appearances, but in one's own life'.¹⁶ That is exactly what Bach does – by addressing us directly and very personally, by finding new ways to draw us in and towards acting it out in our own lives: we become participants in the re-enactment of a story which, however familiar, is told in ways calculated to bring us up short, to jolt us out of our complacency, while throwing us a lifeline of remorse, faith and, ultimately, a path to salvation. Even when pinching some of the clothes of opera in the process, Bach always avoids anything that smacks of theatrical representation. On the occasions when we can identify discrete 'scenes' in both Passions – semi-realistic ones in the case of those when Jesus is on trial before

Pilate or the High Priest – even in these he breaks up the narrative and interpolates moments of reflection or reaction.

So where do they belong? In his book *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner maintains

there has been no specifically Christian mode of tragic drama even in the noontime of the faith. Christianity is an anti-tragic vision of the world ... The Passion of Christ is an event of unutterable grief, but it is also a cipher through which is revealed the love of God for man ... Being a threshold to the eternal, the death of a Christian hero can be an occasion for sorrow but not for tragedy ... Real tragedy can occur only where the tormented soul believes that there is no time left for God's forgiveness. 'And now 'tis too late,' says Faustus in the one play that comes nearest to resolving the inherent contradiction of Christian tragedy. But he is in error. It is never too late to repent, and Romantic melodrama is sound theology when it shows the soul being snatched back from the very verge of damnation.¹⁷

This, of course, is the crux of Byron's portrayal of his hero Manfred in his dying moments:

ABBOT: ... Give thy prayers to Heaven –

Pray – albeit but in thought, – but die not thus.

MANFRED: Old man! 'tis not so difficult to die. [MANFRED expires]

When he came to compose his sublime incidental music to Byron's 'dramatic poem' some thirty years after it was written, in 1848, Robert Schumann followed these spoken words with a short but poignant choral requiem and so the work ends. Schumann had been present at Mendelssohn's celebrated revival of the *Matthew Passion* in Berlin in 1829, and it is possible that he recognised and learnt from the latent melodramatic features of Bach's score – the sense of going straight for the emotional jugular with its 'man of sorrows' approach.

Significantly, Steiner makes no passing reference to the Passions of Bach, perhaps because he considers they do not qualify as true tragedies, since 'the Christian view knows only partial or episodic tragedy. Within its essential optimism there are moments of despair; cruel setbacks can occur during the ascent toward grace.' True, it is impossible for the Christian story to follow the trajectory of a classical tragedy, since Jesus is both the chief protagonist and to a degree the

author of his Passion. Of the two accounts Matthew's comes the closest, in that he borrows certain tragic conventions and gives a highly emotive account of the unjust treatment of the wholly good Jesus by wicked men, whereas in John's Gospel the quasi-tragic figure appears to be in control of and compliant with his fate. My contention, however, is that in both of his Passions Bach proves that music really *can* 'animate the conventions of tragic myth and tragic conduct which had lapsed from the theatre after the seventeenth century', an achievement which Steiner attributes in the first place to Mozart, with his 'total command of the dramatic resources of music', and then to Wagner, with his 'genius for posing decisive questions: could music-drama restore to life those habits of imagination and symbolic recognition which are essential to a tragic theatre but which rationalism and the era of prose had banished from Western consciousness?'¹⁸ While in no way diminishing Mozart's role in this (Wagner's is in any case self-inflated and can comfortably survive a prior claim), I see it as one of Bach's great achievements. Building on the non-operatic foundations of music-drama (see [Chapter 4](#)) as it had evolved during the past century outside the theatre, and often in church – between, say, the publication of Monteverdi's *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin* (1610) and the first airing of the *John Passion* (1724) – Bach set in motion a new burgeoning of the genre, leading his listeners to confront their mortality and compelling them to witness things from which they would normally avert their eyes. Perhaps Steiner might concede that, in this regard, such is the mythic charge to Bach's two great Passions, they could be considered the natural sequel to the spoken dramas of Racine and the English early-seventeenth-century writers, in so far as their themes resonate far beyond their temporal and liturgical borders, demonstrating that 'context of belief and convention which the artist shares with his audience'.



While there is enough documentary evidence to make it possible to reconstruct the original liturgical setting of Bach's Passions,^p we cannot of course recover the way people experienced them at the time. Since

they have proved that they can survive treatments as different as the old massed-choir Victorian rituals (with their strong whiff of sanctimoniousness) and, at the other extreme, the minimalist nostrums of historically informed practice (HIP) – and still move people – we can be certain there is no one definitive way of interpreting them, whether in church, in concert halls or within the secular embrace of the theatre. The search for the most effective ways to present these hugely demanding works – when, where and how, and to whom – has led, in many instances but by no means universally, to a timely abandonment of the starchy reverential rituals of oratorio performance, where once beforked singers sat in a row at the front of a concert platform rising only to perform their solo numbers. One can understand why stage directors have wanted to deconstruct Bach's Passions and to explore different ways of experiencing these powerful music-dramas with their deep human undercurrents. That Bach chose to deploy not one but two orchestras and (momentarily) *three* choirs in his *Matthew Passion* is indicative of drama being intrinsic to the work. Yet to build on this and to treat either of his Passions as unfulfilled operas concerned with 'representation' of one sort or another runs up against many obstacles, such as trying to accommodate the mercurial switches of time and multiple characterisations that are implicit in their unusual structure. Such approaches are likely to give an enhanced sense of the singers' individual identities as biblical characters, whereas Bach's concern was to do the exact opposite, taking pains to transfer their emotional reaction to non-specific singers (who, let us remember, were out of sight to all except the richer pew-holders in the side galleries of the original venues) as they voice their grief, remorse or outrage while speaking on their own and our behalf. Similarly, the chorus – however skilfully they manage the rapid switches between their allotted roles as disciples, bystanders, soldiers or the baying mob and become meditative commentators in a trice – are liable to be seen in a dramatised treatment as belonging to a world *separate* from that of the audience.

The besetting danger here is the creation of a distraction from the mechanics and inexplicable force of the music, something Jonathan Miller managed to avoid in his revelatory 'activation' of the *Matthew Passion* (first given in London in 1993 and in many parts of the world since), doing just enough by spatial juxtaposition and separation

(singers moving among and around the instrumentalists) to suggest different gradations of dialogue – now confrontational (as between separate choirs of believers and mobsters), now intimate, as when the singer of an aria and the obbligato player were placed in close proximity unencumbered by scores and music stands. My own approach is based on the conviction that a similar negotiation between action and meditation can be achieved equally well through a considered deployment of the musical forces in a church or on a conventional concert platform, without replacing one set of rituals with another. While many of us might rejoice at the passing of the old oratorio rituals as the cracking of a great ice floe of misplaced reverence, I see no overwhelming advantage – nor any inherent need – to define and localise the dramatic essence of Bach's Passions by staging them as proxy operas. On the contrary, the moment the drama is freighted with extraneous aesthetic baggage, it risks being flattened out and the music ends up diminished as a result. It is the intense concentration of drama *within* the music and the colossal imaginative force that Bach brings to bear in his Passions that make them the equal of the greatest staged dramas: their power lies in what they leave unspoken. We ignore that at our peril.



^a There is a parallel to be drawn here with listeners today, some of whom look for immersion in a single cultural unfolding, such as the *Matthew Passion* certainly provides – one that creates space and time away from the fidget of perpetual sound bites and being constantly bombarded by noise coming in short sharp stabs.

^b This was included on pp. 101–112 in Vol. 2 of his *Ernst-Scherzhaffte und Satyrische Gedichte*, first published in 1729 – a date used by earlier Bach scholars as evidence of the first performance of Bach's *Matthew Passion*, whereas this ‘well-established’ date ‘rests on nothing more than an unverifiable guess’, as Joshua Rifkin maintained in 1975: ‘the work could just as well have originated in 1727 as in 1729’, he concluded (‘The Chronology of Bach’s Saint Matthew Passion’, MQ, Vol. 61, No. 3 (July 1975)) – or, as I have suggested above, as early as 1725, but not completed on schedule.

^c This is a feature that Stravinsky, hyper-aware of the banality lurking in so much nineteenth-century opera, captured in his superb two-act ‘opera-oratorio’ *Oedipus Rex* (1927), a work which reveals his affinity to the spirit of music-drama outlined in Chapter 4 – a ‘concept of theatre, and beyond that of music itself, as ritual – something, that is, which is re-enacted rather than simply enacted ... the feeling that the characters are in the grip of inexorable forces’ (Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky*:

Oedipus Rex (1993), pp. 36, 48). This sentiment is reinforced by the choral writing, which at times resembles the formalised barbarity of Bach's *turbae*, and at others the sense of emotionally choked valediction we hear in the Pietistic final choruses to both the Passions.

^d The proceedings of the Leipzig Council for 22 Apr. 1723 are worded in such a way as to make it absolutely clear that a condition of Councillor Steger voting for Bach as cantor was that 'he should make compositions that were not too theatrical' (BD II, No. 129/NBR p. 103). We have repeatedly seen in earlier chapters how Bach in his cantatas and Passions comprehensively flouted this injunction.

^e Bach's occasional librettist, the Pastor Erdmann Neumeister, maintained that 'what we read about the suffering and death of Christ in the Passion story, and what we hear about this in sermons during this Lenten season – that we must all take as having happened for us and as having been done as an act of satisfaction' (preface to *Solid Proof that Christ Jesus has Rendered Satisfaction for Us and Our Sins*, quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach among the Theologians* (1986), pp. 94–5).

^f This comes from the article 'As Flowers in Sunlight' (*Guardian*, 23 July 2005) in which Philip Pullman made an impassioned plea for theatre for children and the art of adapting stories for the stage. Only in the theatre, he maintains, can you find 'strong stories with vivid characters and existing events' which 'will always find an audience whether young or old'; so that directors are 'quite right to ransack the whole of literature in search of them'. 'The importance of cherishing and preserving a physical, sensuous connection with things was something I laid great stress on in *His Dark Materials*, and I meant it. Such experiences are profoundly important to our full development as human beings.'

^g As Eric Chafe writes, 'Luther referred to this passage often – twice in the Passion sermon – to point out that the Passion was intended to awaken consciousness of sin in the believer, not mere lamentation over Jesus' sufferings or outcry over the treachery of Judas' (*Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (1991) p. 364).

^h Robert Levin observes that 'Bach's decision to combine the G major chorale with the E minor principal material will engender a deliberate wrenching effect as the tonal exigencies of these discrete components of the piece pull in opposite directions.' He shows convincingly that Bach is 'striving not for circularity [the thesis of Karol Berger's *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow* (2007), pp. 45–59] but continuity, in which the sense of both timing and time itself seems caught up in a drama of relentless forward motion' (JAMS, Vol. 63, No. 3 (1 Dec. 2010), p. 665). 'As to [Berger's] notion that the work as a whole suspends time by folding past, present, and future into a single level of Now, is this not ultimately true of every performance, whether a play, an opera, a ballet, or a piece of instrumental music, and regardless of style?' (p. 666).

ⁱ Picander's libretto – which was available on sale to the congregation – was published as the second volume of his *Ernst-Scherzhafte und Satyrische Gedichte* (Leipzig, 1729). It contains his own madrigalian verses, but none of the biblical texts and only two chorales; yet, in the captions to his aria texts, he refers to events that have just happened in the Gospel narrative (for example, 'after the woman had anointed Jesus' and 'after Jesus' capture'), thus indicating his ideas for the structural scaffolding of the Passion. There are a few gaps and miscalculations, such as at the end of Part I, where by placing the 'Sind Blitze, sind Donner' as its climax – a thrilling idea in itself – Picander shows he had forgotten that there is an extended speech for Jesus (Matthew 26:52–4) to fit in at this point (see p. 416; and see Ulrich Leisinger, 'Forms and Functions of the Choral Movements in J. S. Bach's *St Matthew Passion*' in *Bach Studies*, Daniel R. Melamed (ed.) (1995), Vol. 2, pp. 76–7).

^j Indeed it may well have been the clergy who decided precisely where to break the musical narration for the sermon. It could so easily have come at the end of the Matthew's Chapter 26 – with Peter's denial and remorse – just as it did in the *John Passion*; but here (see the schema above) it results in a more equal length between parts I and II.

^k This may just be a consequence of Bach's plan to concentrate and unify his antiphonal ensembles at this juncture into a single orchestra and choir. Even the *soprano in ripieno* (assuming that the line was allocated to a group of trebles) are drawn in and welded to those in Choirs 1 and 2. Did they physically move from the 'swallows' nest' to the west gallery, or did a sub-conductor – a Thomaner prefect – relay Bach's beat to them there, as was the practice in St Mark's Venice under the Gabrielis and Salzburg Cathedral during Biber's time? Either way, any physical separation of forces in this movement – particularly of the flutes, oboes and continuo, who have most of the semiquaver passagework – can be troublesome in performance and requires special vigilance. But there could be another explanation for its slight awkwardness – its early provenance. Arthur Mendel was the first Bach scholar to propose an original of Weimar provenance (c. 1714–16) for this movement ('Traces of the Pre-History of Bach's *St John* and *St Matthew* Passions' in *Festschrift Otto Erich Deutsch zum 80. Geburtstag*, Walter Gerstenberg, et al. (eds) (1963), pp. 32–5) and expressed his surprise at finding that 'what seems like a mature masterpiece should have been written so early'. I suggest that it could have originated earlier still – perhaps by as much as a decade – in that period when Bach was first flexing his creative wings as a composer of figural music and producing seminal works such as BWV 106, the *Actus tragicus*. I have no formal proof of this – just a strong sense that it belongs stylistically to the earlier period marked by Bach's first concerted setting of words by Martin Luther (BWV 4), at the time he was employed in Arnstadt and headed for Mühlhausen (1707).

^l The madrigalian style Bach adopts for the second chorus here shows sufficient affinity with that of Heinrich Schütz in his biblical dialogue SWV 339, *Ich beschwöre euch* – a miniature scenic masterpiece – to make one wonder whether Bach had come across it and took it as a point of departure, or, was it the nuptial dialogue of his cousin Johann Christoph Bach, *Meine Freundin, du bist schön* (see [Chapter 3](#), p. 74) lodged in his memory which inspired his setting of these words? He himself had already prepared his Leipzig audience for the close association between the Daughter of Zion with the King's daughter or bride by reviving his Weimar cantata BWV 162, *Ach, ich sehe, itzt, da ich zur Hochzeit gehe*, in his First Leipzig Cycle, and in his Annunciation cantata BWV 1, *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, first given on 25 Mar. 1725, which also refers to 'my king and my bridegroom' and was the last music to be heard in Leipzig before Good Friday. However, as we saw in [Chapter 9](#), it was BWV 127, *Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott*, that formed a bridge over the Lenten period and may well have been intended by Bach as a deliberate 'flyer' to announce his *Matthew Passion*, which in the end had to be held back for another two years (see p. 330).

^m The great conductor Bruno Walter, who revered the *Matthew Passion* and performed it every year during a ten-year period in Munich, wrote with great insight about the work. He saw this aria as an intimation of the Resurrection, allowing us 'to partake in the vision of a soul that directs the glances of its fellows to where its own are aiming: to the resurrected One'. But this does not mean, I feel, that in doing so Bach 'stepped outside the work that he had laid down in collaboration with Picander' (*On Music and Music-Making* (1961), p. 189).

ⁿ 'The rhetorical force of someone singing about henceforth containing Jesus, when he has just indeed been acting through the last moments of his saviour's life, is undoubtedly very strong' (Butt, *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions* (2010), p. 207).

^o Bruno Walter claimed that: ‘we hear [Bach’s] own voice and perceive his own heart in the singing of those pious, compassionate figures of the work’s second dimension ...[by] singers [who] are nameless – and yet Bach’s *faithful heart* has filled these supra-mundane figures with the pure, warm life-blood of his music, thus personifying them on their own, lofty plane’ (op. cit., pp. 175–6).

^P Daniel R. Melamed (*Hearing Bach’s Passions* (2005), p. 135) provides a table showing the liturgy of the Good Friday Vespers (starting at 1.45 p.m.) in Leipzig’s principal churches in Bach’s time:

Hymn: ‘Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund’

Passion (Part I)

Hymn: ‘Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend’

Sermon

Passion (Part II)

Motet: *Ecce, quomodo moritur iustus* [Gallus]

Collect prayer

Biblical verse: ‘Die Strafe liegt auf ihm’ (Isaiah 53:5)

Hymn: ‘Nun danket alle Gott’