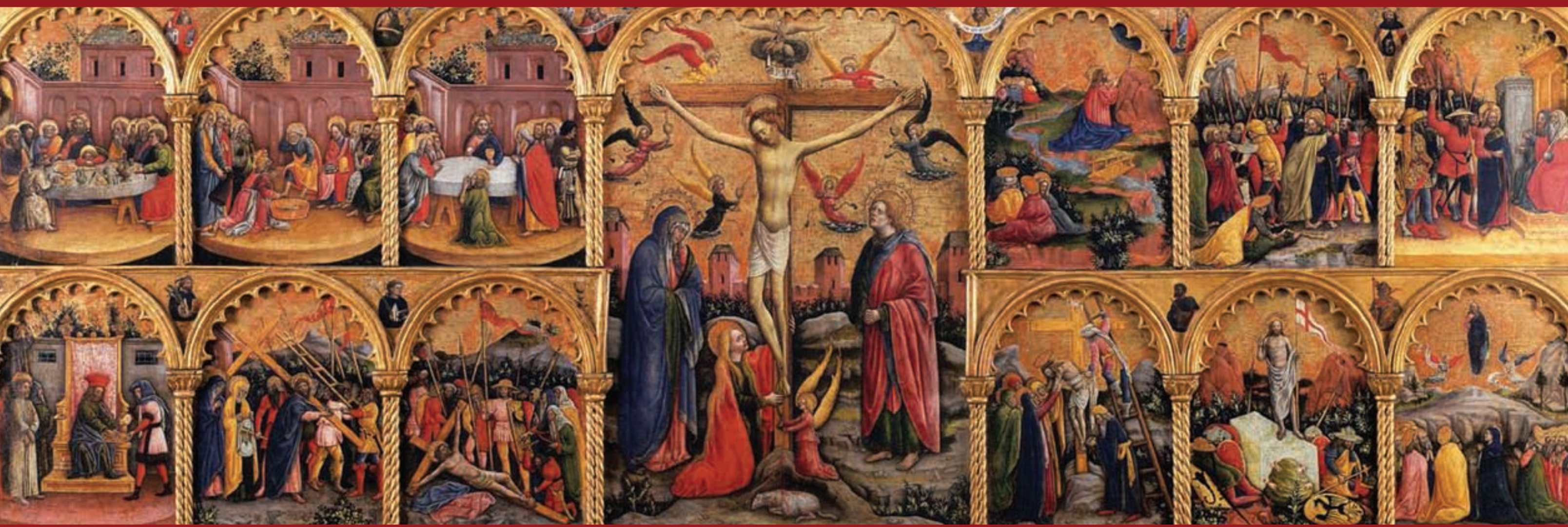
AMERICAN
BACH
SOLOISTS

JEFFREY THOMAS
MUSIC DIRECTOR



2011/2012
Our Twenty Third Season

St. Matthew Passion
Johann Sebastian Bach

February 24 - 27, 2012
Belvedere - Berkeley - San Francisco - Davis

Welcome from Jeffrey Thomas

Jeffrey Thomas
Artistic Director

A willingness to look at music and its performance with fresh eyes and ears is a characteristic that defines the American Bach Soloists. The merits of any performance organization are those that are truly shared by all of its members and support systems, and at ABS we take pride in our approach to consider all aspects of a musical work—including the number of players and singers (an ongoing discourse that has involved dozens of the world's most accomplished musicologists), tempos, pitch, rhetoric, and even modern-day function—and to offer those sometimes contrasting perspectives to our audiences as a means to more richly and more palpably experience the music of other centuries.

This kind of musical inquisitiveness might seem ironic, considering the reasonable assumption that period performance practice could be an exercise in "right or wrong" policies based on clear-cut research into the wealth of historical data and performance implications that are available nowadays to all performers. But in many (or most) cases we either have too much or too little information to determine what would be an absolutely best set of interpretive choices for practically any given work. Even our annual performances of Handel's *Messiah* and Bach's Mass in B Minor always afford us opportunities to revisit our conclusions and find something "new" each year to perfect and further polish.

Inquiry is the essence of what we do, and providing interesting and compelling performances is our *raison d'être*. So when I was presented with a gift of a new edition of the early version of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* a few years ago, I was thrilled by the prospect of bringing that fascinating score, still "hot off the press," to our audiences so that together we might share and experience yet another powerful glimpse into the way music was performed three centuries ago during Bach's lifetime.

You are about to hear a dramatically different soundscape in these performances of a work that had no comparable precedent and that has had no equal since. Over the last year or two, a number of superb ensembles have presented performances of the *St. Matthew Passion* in almost exactly the same configuration that you are about to experience, and we are happy to bring this very special event to our audiences.

Please turn ahead to page 13 and get started on the program notes. My colleague, musicologist John Butt, and I have collaborated to bring that information to your fingertips, and I am grateful to a host of individuals—including concert sponsors, ABS staff members, and Bay Area community early music advocates—for enabling this production.

Thank you for sharing this wonderful adventure of constant rediscovery with us. I hope you enjoy the performance!

AMERICAN BACH SOLOISTS
44 Page Street, Suite 504
San Francisco CA 94102-5973

Tel: (415) 621-7900
Fax: (415) 621-7920

americanbach.org
info@americanbach.org
twitter.com/americanbach
facebook.com/americanbach

American Bach Soloists
are Artists-in-Residence at
St. Stephen's Church, Belvedere.

© 2012 American Bach Soloists.
All rights reserved.
Reproduction in whole or in part
without permission is prohibited.

Program Notes

While a great many historical disciplines have benefited from centuries of exploration, certainly it is the field of Bach studies that has garnered the most attention from musicologists. Literally thousands of music historians have focused their efforts on accurately identifying timelines, manuscripts, contexts, and background circumstances of Bach's music, and among them are a dozen or so giants in the field. Yet, despite their best efforts and with all best intentions and tireless dedication to the processes of discovery, many points—some fine and some quite general—are still left in question.

The two monuments among Bach's compositions that are universally acknowledged as the most impressive are the compilation of movements known as the Mass in B Minor and the *St. Matthew Passion*. Although the extant manuscript version of the Mass in B Minor reveals details of its derivation from nearly 35 years of Bach's music, the only autograph manuscript of the *St. Matthew Passion* dates from what was probably its third performance, given nearly a decade after the first.

Not unlike the easy-going assumption of most performers that the version of Handel's *Messiah,* as offered by current day publishers, reflects well enough Handel's intentions, performers and audiences alike have casually accepted the large-scale, amplified renderings of the *St. Matthew Passion* that were set in motion through Felix Mendelssohn's important and influential resuscitation of the work in 1829. But the autograph score of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* from 1736, which forms the basis of modern-day editions and performances, barely reveals its true original scale when compared to a score of the first or "early" version that has been handed down to us through the centuries via a somewhat complex and circuitous route.

The genre of the Passion settings that Bach would produce in Leipzig was relatively new to their audiences. In fact, John Butt points out that we, now in the twenty-first century, are more familiar with the format than Bach's congregations were. Such is one of the advantages of looking backward and carefully studying, through typically annual performances of the works, those great and towering examples of rhetoric that have tremendous power and effectiveness. In any event, it was Bach's immediate predecessor, Johann Kuhnau, who introduced the idea of annual presentations of biblical oratorio Passions on Good Friday, 1721. Within the decades leading up to Bach's composition of Passion settings, most other composers wrote for rather limited forces, usually for four or five voices with only as many instruments. Significantly, earlier forms of Passion settings began as chant-recitations of the Passion text initially sung by *one* person intoning all roles. Gradually, additional singers and chorus were added, followed by the incorporation of contrapuntal textures and independent instrumental material, and eventually including non-biblical texts in the forms of poetic interpolations sung as arias and chorales.

But Bach alone would perfect this multi-faceted and multi-layered method of powerfully reminding his congregation (and audience) of the message of the Gospel text by imbuing those poetic interpolations—the arias that are sung by solo voices at various points within the Passion drama—with a "collective" voice, so that the emotional "soliloquies" became the assertions of each and every member of the congregation. Finally, the use of chorales, which were as familiar to Bach's listeners as nursery rhymes are to school children, would firmly establish ownership of the Gospel text—its meaning and its illumination through the arias—as that of the congregants. The Gospel text—the most revered dogma that had been (in pre-Reformation times) the property of the church and *not* of the people due to its lack of availability in the native languages of the masses—was brought closer to individual ownership through the voice of contemporary observers (the aria singers), lending their perspectives as 18th-century believers. And those perspectives, in turn, were confirmed through the great Lutheran mechanism of right of possession which would take place throughout the Passion setting: the singing of chorales.

When Bach took on his new position in Leipzig as the Cantor of St. Thomas Church, he immediately set out to dazzle the community with his inarguably extraordinary skills as a composer and as a teacher of theology through his apparently divinely inspired music. Christmas in 1723 was a splendid affair, including the Sanctus that would become a part of the Mass in B Minor. During his first year, he composed some extremely difficult cantatas and performed his *St. John Passion* in 1724. But within that first year, he became painfully aware of a situation that would significantly affect his compositional plans. He discovered that the boy sopranos were simply not able to perform his difficult and complex music. This was a problem that could not be remedied in any less than several years of more proper training (something that Bach did not want to do!), so, probably quite dismayed, he began to compose easier music for the treble voices, leaving the more challenging material to altos, tenors, and basses, all of whom would have had many more years of qualifying experience.

Even though there are indications that he had planned to perform the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1725, he did not finish the setting until at least two years later. We can see from the cantatas composed between 1724 and 1725 that he asked his boy sopranos to sing very little more than simple chorales, even in the context of grand opening movements of cantatas. The other voices would sing the complicated "figural" music, always leading up to the intonation of a simple chorale melody to be sung by the trebles. Whereas the music for the sopranos in the *St. Matthew Passion* is certainly as difficult as is the music for the other vocal parts, we can understand why he slowed down his pace with the *St. Matthew*—in light of his dissatisfaction with the skill sets of the young singers at the St. Thomas School—and opted instead to reprise the *St. John Passion* for a second performance in 1725, albeit with a few modifications to make the remounting less obvious. After all, for better or for worse, they had already learned the *St. John Passion*. It would not be until 1727, at the earliest, that Bach would first perform the *St. Matthew Passion*, but in a version that is compellingly different in proportion than what is generally known to most of us.

This brings us to a good opportunity to review the ongoing deliberations about the number of musicians that Bach would use for his cantata performances. Ironically, one single

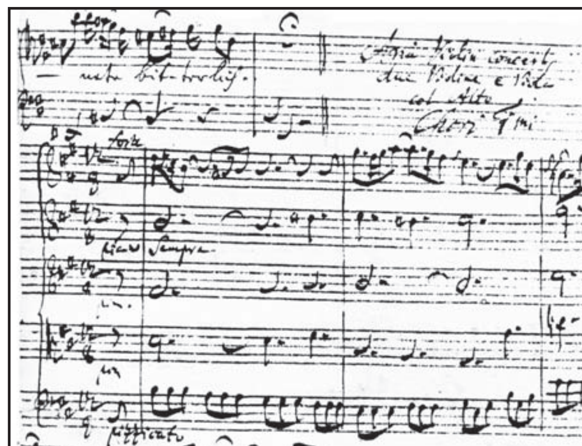
document—a letter that Bach sent to the Leipzig town council in 1730, in which he complains about the lack of enough qualified musicians to satisfactorily carry out his responsibilities—is used by both sides of the argument. Just as "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," the conclusions of historians as to the implications of the letter change quite radically from one camp to the other. What is certain, though, and stated literally, is that only a very few boy sopranos were qualified to sing difficult music, and this had been the case for several years. With only a handful of qualified trebles, it is even more clear that Bach's assignments of the good voices for figural music, and the rest for easier motet and chorale singing, makes sense and should be applied to the performance of Bach's music in sweeping terms.

This is not to say that this principle must be applied to all modern-day renderings. We have grown quite fond of our large-scale performances. The establishment of choral societies that began as early as the second half of the eighteenth century, and their rapid growth both in size and number, led to concert hall stages and houses being filled to the brim for performances of oratorio and concertized liturgical works. That is well and good, but we have the opportunity to experience first-hand a "new" version of the *St. Matthew Passion* by restoring Bach's first plans as recorded in a score that has a remarkable pedigree.

One of Bach's copyists (and sons-in-law), named Johann Christoph Altnickol, apparently had a copy of the score from the late 1720s, and in the 1750s, after Bach's death, Altnickol had one of *his* students, named Johann Christoph Farlau, prepare a copy, which has survived. There are some fascinating differences between this so-called "early" version and the later version from 1736. For example, in the early version:

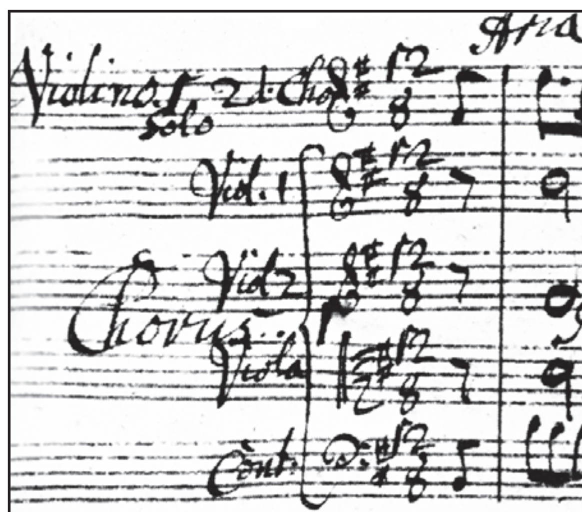
- Each orchestra does not have its own continuo or bass section; one central continuo section plays for both orchestras. In the later version, two completely distinct orchestras are used, each with its own bass section. The early version utilizes a practice called *basso seguente* that dates from more than a century before.
- Some arias are assigned to different singers or instruments.
- The chorale/chorus "*O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß*" that ends Part I in the later version does not yet appear. In its place is a simple chorale to close Part I.
- The solo violin parts in the arias "*Ebarme dich*" and "*Gebt mir mein Jesus wieder*" appear in the opposite orchestras! In other words, while the alto and accompanimental strings for "*Ebarme dich*" are placed in Orchestra/Coro I, the solo violin part appears in Orchestra/Coro II. The same is true, inversely, for the bass aria "*Gebt mir mein Jesus wieder.*" That inescapably indicates only one thing: there were *not* two first violinists in either orchestra. (See illustrations at right.)

This last point is rather jaw-dropping in terms of how clearly it shows that, at least in the 1720s, Bach wrote the work for one-per-part forces. As we already know, there are no vocal parts that do not include the respective solo arias; the only *ripieno* singers were those who sang the opening chorale—establishing (and requiring) a *third* group of performers—accompanied by the swallow's nest organ that rested on the east wall of St. Thomas Church. A quick recalling of the definition of *ripieno* throws this into further relief: Bach used the word "*ripieno*" in only one context in the *St. Matthew Passion*, when referring to those singers who would intone the chorale in the opening chorus. The word refers to the body of musicians who accompany the *concertino* (or *solo*)



From Bach's 1736 manuscript: the last notes of the recitative before the aria "*Erbarme dich*" followed by Bach's indications: Aria Violin concert[ato] due Violine e Viola col Alto **Chori Primi.**
Note the bracket that groups all parts into Orchestra I.

From the Altnickol/Farlau 1750s manuscript (a copy of Bach's 1720s version): the aria "*Erbarme dich*" indicating: Violino I solo **2d. Chor.**
Viol[in] I, Viol[in] 2, Viola, Cont[inuo] **Chorus I**



Detail: note the bracket that groups the lower four lines in Orchestra I, but does not include the top violin solo line from Orchestra II.

instruments or voices that otherwise perform the core of the musical material. That highly specific relationship provides no ambiguity. Ripienists do not have further ripienists, therefore the performers of the music that is *not* marked *ripieno* are soloists. Besides, if Bach had barely enough qualified singers to satisfactorily perform cantatas on a weekly basis up until the early 1730s, he certainly did not have twice as many to perform an extremely difficult "double-chorus" work such as this. One more point of disambiguation can be made by considering the term "Coro" that Bach used to indicate each half of the combined performing forces. Whereas the Italian word *"coro"* means, literally, "chorus," its original usages did not make any implication as to the number of performers. Bach drew upon the Italian tradition of *cori spezzati* (separated choirs) for the *St. Matthew Passion,* but, in this context, *coro* means a body or group of musicians (instrumentalists and/or singers) that would perform many different parts, not many musicians *per* part.

So, following all implications of the early version score, our production will be one-per-part all around. We should remind ourselves that we are quite comfortable with the *concertato* concept of baroque vocal and instrumental works, whereby an ensemble of soloists would perform "concerted" music one-per-part, and it was really not until the Mendelssohn production of the *St. Matthew Passion,* which was quite large, that the performance of this work in particular, having been out of the repertory for more than 75 years, first gained the context of being a rather gigantic affair, transforming what was originally the voice of *one* individual Evangelist (and performed by one voice) into the voices of potentially hundreds of performers.

For example, let's consider the individual characters within any of the Passions: in their original contexts, their words were *relayed* to us through the voice of the Evangelist (Matthew, John, etc.), much as a storyteller recites the words of all the characters within a story. Nowadays, we are used to hearing the ten or so smaller "roles" sung by as many singers, often from within the chorus, and usually listed as "cast members" in a program booklet. This individualization of those parts distracts us from the fact that their words are, in fact, *reported* to us through the single perspective of the Evangelist—Matthew, in our case tonight—who, himself, is telling us what others said. Whereas Bach's original parts indicate that the parts for all characters within the drama were separately distributed among his singers (except for the Evangelist, whose part is included in *all* the music for Chorus I tenor), all sources indicate that Bach had only two or three tenors and as many basses on hand, so any individual singer from Bach's resources would have sung several roles. This practice in no small way hearkens back to the origins of Passion performance, when the entirety of the Passion text was sung by only one voice, later expanding to just a handful of singers. Instead, we tend to think of these parts in 19th-century operatic terms, rather than remembering that, of all the scriptural text, there is but *one* voice, and one interpretation, not multiple voices of many independently rendered characters.

Ironically, the intensity that can be generated by more compact forces can easily surpass the potential fervency of a much larger ensemble. Our compliance to all of these compelling indications will include two possibly willful exceptions: While scholars have their differing opinions about this, I cannot bring myself to believe that it would have been possible to keep the congregation silent during the singing of chorales. They had learned them in their childhoods and, while many were otherwise illiterate, the melodies and words of the chorales were as familiar to them all as the backs of their hands (as the saying goes). Besides, the chorales represent the third, and most colloquial, level of perspective in the Passions: the Gospel texts are the most distant and venerated; the recitative/aria pairings represent *contemporary* relationships to the drama and implications of the Gospel texts (not the reactions of individuals "at the scene" as there simply weren't other individuals in many of them); and the chorales represent the most accessible, comfortable, and confident ownership of the theological messages (they *are* the property of the congregation). So, we will utilize 16 additional singers to render the chorales, creating a representation of that relationship to Bach's congregations, as well as creating a palpable link to our own audiences. To add intuition to the mix, knowing full well that every chorale in the *St. Matthew Passion* would have been known by all of Bach's *less* able choristers, and that it was for the singing of chorale melodies *specifically* that Bach employed them during the years between 1724 and 1726, it is easy to imagine that just such a solution would have naturally occurred in Bach's day.

Secondly, and without any specific historical justification, we will have the additional 16 join in the opening and closing choruses. The global perspectives that those movements provide—framing what lies between them like two ornate pilasters—seem to justify, in our modern-day performances and contexts, a greater body of singers. After all, the opening chorus is exactly about *worlds* of believers, people, and cultures joining each other across millennia, as they are exhorted to witness the Passion story as it is about to unfold.

The manuscript of this early version was published in 2004 as part of the Neue Bach-Ausgabe (New Bach Edition), which is the second complete edition of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, produced by the German publishing company, Bärenreiter. Extensive research went into the preparation of the volume, so much so that this version is now considered to be one of the most important recent developments in Bach musicology. From the pen of Altnickol's student, Farlau, the manuscript eventually fell into the possession of Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832), a German conductor and composer, who had among his students the young Felix Mendelssohn. It seems that, in 1823, young Mendelssohn wished to have a copy of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*. Zelter had the Farlau manuscript and, although he was at first reluctant to share it, he gave permission to Eduard Rietz, Mendelssohn's friend, to make the copy as a belated Christmas present from Mendelssohn's grandmother. A few years later, Rietz would be the concertmaster in the legendary 1829 performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* that would be the first since Bach's death, and which would mark the beginning of the great revival of Bach's music.

© 2012 Jeffrey Thomas

Program Notes

The tradition of singing one of the four Gospel Passion narratives on Good Friday and Palm Sunday stretches back to the beginnings of the formalized Christian liturgy. Like the other Gospel readings, it was originally chanted by a single deacon but, in the course of time, he began to alter his tessitura and style according to his role as the Evangelist, Jesus, or the other characters and crowd. These three roles were eventually taken over by separate singers together with a choir to recite the crowd scenes. It was basically this format that the Lutheran Reformers inherited in the sixteenth century, and early Lutheran settings (such as Johann Walter's) were still chanted within the Eucharistic celebrations on Good Friday and Palm Sunday in Bach's era. What is especially interesting is the fact that the Passion story had a musical-dramatic tradition well before the invention of opera and oratorio. It was only a matter of time before these later dramatic genres would cross-fertilize with the church tradition.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century several more elaborate versions of the Passion were developed, involving independent instrumental parts, introducing free poetry around the biblical narrative (Oratorio Passions) or presenting entirely free elaborations of the Passion story. These latter were designed for spiritual concerts rather than for Holy Week liturgies and are thus termed Passion Oratorios. Most of these genres incorporated the most up-to-date musical forms and devices from Italian opera, capitalizing, as it were, on the conventions that congregations would have learned in the world of secular entertainment. However, the Oratorio Passion did not arrive in Leipzig until 1717 (at the modish Neue-Kirche), and the Cantorate of the Thomasschule, under the aging Johann Kuhnau, did not perform its first Oratorio Passion until 1721, shortly before Bach himself came to Leipzig (1723). Thus 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 have often heard it many more times than did the original performers or even Bach himself.

Bach's Passions were performed during the afternoon Vesper service on Good Friday, their two parts replacing the cantata and Magnificat which were normally sung on either side of the sermon. With a hymn opening and closing the liturgy, the entire service was thus symmetrical, with its central axis falling on the sermon. Like Bach's cantatas, the Passions adopt something of the sermon's function since the free poetry of the arias, ariosos, and framing choruses provide both a commentary and an emotional interpretation of the biblical text, one that is designed to effect an actual change of mood and attitude on the part of the believer.

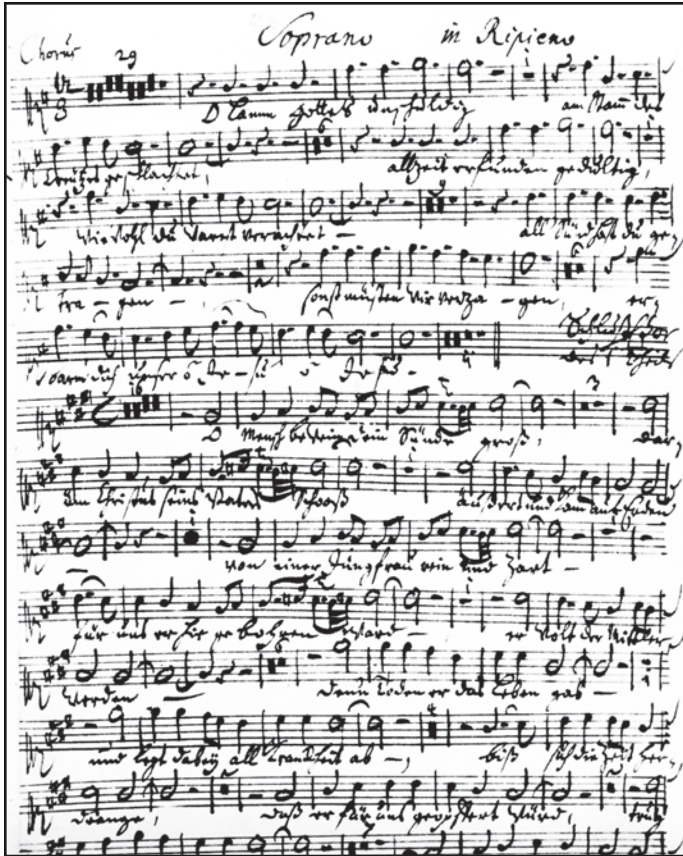
Moreover, the symmetrical structure of the liturgy finds its analogue in Bach's musical pacing of the Passion. This is most evident when Bach wishes to highlight the importance or irony of a particular event or concept. For instance, the point at which Peter swears that he will not deny Christ is surrounded by two verses of the Passion Chorale, the second ("*Ich will hier bei dir stehen*") a semitone below the first ("*Erkenne mich, mein Hüter*"). This therefore functions as a musical metaphor of descent or depression, alluding to the frailty of human promises. The aria "*Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben*" is perhaps the most important of all since it underlines one of the central themes of the *Matthew Passion*—that Christ died for the love of humankind—and this is the focal point falling between the two matching choruses, "*Laß ihn Kreuzigen*". These—depicting the crowd's desire to crucify Christ—provide a vivid antithesis to Christ's love, but, given the fact that the second chorus (coming directly after "*Aus Liebe*") is a tone higher, there is a sense that Christ's supreme act of love has changed things in an upward, positive direction: we recognize it as precisely the same music, yet every note is different. Thus the music could act as a metaphor for the mystery of our own spiritual development: we remain exactly the same beings yet we are profoundly changed.

It is not difficult to understand some of the complaints that members of the congregation voiced in Bach's time; the Passions do, after all, borrow liberally from secular conventions such as dance and, particularly, opera. However, the *Matthew Passion* also draws heavily from the long traditions of spiritual meditation by which the story is interspersed with the regular breaks (fifteen in all) provided by the paired ariosos and arias. These force the implied listener into personal contemplation; the chorales moreover engender the sense of a community response to the biblical events. The whole thus has something of the character of a Lutheran Stations of the Cross. The free text follows Luther's own meditations on the Passion which require the believer first to acknowledge his own guilt and show remorse, then to recognize that Christ has suffered on our behalf—that his love will conquer all—and, finally, to experience reconciliation with Christ and to imitate his example (most movingly captured in the final aria "*Mache dich*"). According to Luther, this ambition to imitate Christ could not be fulfilled without our having gone through these earlier stages.

Particularly subtle in the construction of the free poetry (by the Leipzig poet, Picander) and Bach's musical setting is the emphasis on dialogue form, necessitating the performing format of double chorus and orchestra. This rhetorical device allows for contrasting or even opposing points of view to be presented simultaneously (e.g. "*So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen*" / "*Laßt ihn, haltet, bindet nicht!*"), complimentary points ("*Ach, nun ist mein Jesu hin*" / "*Wo ist denn dein Freund hingegangen*"), or a dialogue between a single speaker and a group ("*Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen*" / "*So schlafen unsre Sünden ein*"). All of these devices serve to personify the various *voices* within a single listener, acting out one's reactions and conflicts.

The most impressive of the dialogue numbers is the opening chorus, which could be considered the *Exordium* (the traditional opening section of an oration). This is a dialogue between Christian believers and the Old Testament figures, the Daughters of Zion (from the Song of Songs). The theme of love in the Song of Songs is recast in a Christian context with Christ as the loving bridegroom and the church as his bride. A third element is introduced with the German chorale on the Agnus Dei, "*O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig,*" sung by ripieno sopranos (often boys' voices today, in a tradition that dates back to the nineteenth century).

Program Notes



Detail from Bach's autograph copy of the *Soprano in Ripieno* part.

This would have had particular significance for members of Bach's congregation since they would have heard this hymn at the conclusion of the morning Eucharistic liturgy. Christ is thus portrayed as an innocent sacrificial lamb, an image that points towards the Apocalypse when Christ as a lamb rules the New Jerusalem, a bridegroom to the community of all believers. In Bach's time this melody would have sounded out loudly from the second organ at the east of the church, a graphic depiction of the direction of Christ's throne in the New Jerusalem. In all, then, this chorus sets up three temporal levels, the ancient Daughters of Zion in dialogue with the Christians of the New Testament, both pointing forward to the future union with the Lamb, achieved through his ultimate love (of which we are about to hear). We may also note that the chorale is the only element of the chorus in the major mode, a vision of the celestial city that, at this time, is still subservient to the earthly tonic of e minor.

The analogy between the Bach-Picander *Matthew Passion* and a sermon is thus not to be taken lightly. Moreover, for about half the aria texts Picander drew from a series of Passion sermons by the theologian Heinrich Müller (published in 1681). Given that Bach himself possessed these, he may have instigated the borrowing. This not only shows that both were thinking along the lines of sermon composition but also that the sermon was an important poetic genre of the time, as much artistic elaboration as stern preaching. An understanding of the rhetoric of the Lutheran sermon as both persuasive and cunningly ornamental sheds a significant light on the role of music in the liturgy of Bach's era.

With its unfolding levels of symbolism, theological interpretation and—most striking of all—psychological insight, the *Matthew Passion* is perhaps the most challenging and ambitious Christian artwork. It is thus not entirely surprising that Bach seems to have spent considerable time and care in preparing the work. He probably began writing it in 1725 but did not finish or perfect it in time for the Good Friday performance; the earlier *John Passion* was performed on this occasion, only a year after its premiere and containing a substitute chorale fantasia ("*O Mensch, bewein*") that eventually became part of the *Matthew Passion*. Bach did not present the latter work until 1727 and refined it again during the 1730s. During the last few years of his life he went to great trouble to repair the autograph score, sewing in new patches of paper that are designed to be barely perceptible to the casual reader. This could hardly have been necessitated by the performing demands of the time and points to the special status Bach seems to have afforded the work, a status that was not a general conceptual possibility until the early nineteenth century. It is not surprising that the work became an immediate "masterwork" at the time of its revival by Mendelssohn in 1829; this was precisely the period when such a concept was developed.

Bach shared something of the encyclopedic urge of his age, and in the *Matthew Passion* compiled virtually every possible musical form available for an oratorio: recitatives (accompanied and secco), arioso, aria (several types which include dance and concerto elements), chorales, chorale settings, choruses, and motets. Together with two elements unusual in Bach works—the doubled forces and the "string halo" for Christ's utterances—these elements render it far more ambitious than any opera of the age and something which works on rather more levels than the more brutally effective *John Passion*.

Bach obviously saw all excellent earthly things as capable of serving the highest purpose; it is precisely this religious conception of music and of the world as a whole that lies at the heart of most disputes concerning church music. To some—then as now—nothing does religion a finer service than Bach's music; to others, sumptuous music undermines a transcendent view of the Godly and spiritual, which are to be kept somewhat apart from the world. While it is obvious that our contemporary horizon is very different from that of Bach's time and, consequently, many meanings and implications in the work are lost, we have gained many more dimensions and modes of appreciation. Bach spun a dialogue between Old and New Testaments, between both these elements and the Lutheran tradition (especially with the traditional chorales) and between all these and the believer of his own time (all together pointing towards the Apocalypse); to these we can add a rich history of reception (with both its insights and mystifications) and our own particular standpoint, within or without the Christian tradition.

© 2012 John Butt