

Johann Sebastian Bach's St. John Passion from 1725: A Liturgical Interpretation

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When we listen to Johann Sebastian Bach's vocal works today, we do this most of the time in a concert. Bach's passions and his *B minor Mass*, his cantatas and songs are an integral part of our canon of concert music. Nothing can be said against this practice. The passions and the Mass have been a part of the Western concert repertoire since the 1830s, and there may not have been a "Bach Revival" in the nineteenth century (and no editions of Bach's works for that matter) without Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's concert performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* in the Berlin Singakademie in 1829.¹ However, the original *sitz im leben* of both large-scaled works like his passions, and his smaller cantatas, is the liturgy. Most of his vocal works were composed for use during services in the churches of Leipzig.

The pieces unfold their meaning in the context of the liturgy. They engage in a complex intertextual relationship with the liturgical texts that frame them, and with the musical (and theological) practices of the liturgical year of which they are a part. The following essay will outline the liturgical context of the second version of the *St. John Passion* (BWV 245a) Bach performed on Good Friday 1725 in Leipzig. The piece is a revision of the familiar version of the passion Bach had composed the previous year. The 1725 version of the passion was performed by the *Yale Schola Cantorum* in 2006, and was accompanied by several lectures I gave in New Haven and New York City.

The Liturgical Year as Soundscape

We come to a performance of the *St. John Passion* from a sonic experience significantly different from the one Bach's listeners had when they attended the performance in 1725.² Maybe we just listened to the news on our car radio, or to a pop song. Maybe we took the elevator and endured elevator-music. Maybe we just came from home where we enjoyed a CD recording of Beethoven's *Third Symphony* or a Brahms string quartet. Our listening to the passion has to compete with other sonic experiences. Bach's *St. John Passion* might interrupt our everyday musical life, but it is nevertheless a part of it.

A listener in 1725 had a different experience. Not only did he not know the pop song, the Beethoven symphony, or the string quartet; his perception of the *Passion* was shaped by the musical context of the liturgical year. A listener who heard the initial measures of the *St. John Passion* in 1725, the flowing motion of the orchestral prelude in the flutes, then in the oboes, supported by the fundament of the strings, had been on a long musical "diet." The last regular performance of vocal-instrumental music in the liturgy had been more than one and a half months earlier, on February 11, when Bach performed his chorale cantata *Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott* (BWV 127), the first movement of which featured a similar instrumentation.³ In the following weeks, during Lent, the instruments had to remain silent. The only music performed in the liturgy were hymns by the congregation and liturgical chants. No figural music (with or without instruments), or soloistic organ music, was allowed during the services.⁴ This regulation was not unique to Leipzig, but rooted in an old liturgical tradition shared by Catholics and Protestants alike.⁵

Not only was liturgical music reduced during Lent, but public and private festivities were also limited during that time, and thus the musical diet affected not only the worship services but

the entire soundscape of Leipzig. The weeks before Good Friday must have been much quieter in the city than during the remainder of the year.

The most significant interruption of this liturgical silence took place five days before Good Friday. The Sunday *Palmarum* fell on 25 March, which was also the feast of the Annunciation. By tradition the feast day trumped the liturgical silence of Lent, and it was celebrated in a festive fashion. Bach performed his cantata *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* (BWV 1), a festive chorale cantata with an elaborate instrumental part. This was, however, the only time that the silence was interrupted.

The performance of the *St. John Passion* in the Good Friday Vespers of 1725 thus ended a long period of musical frugality during the liturgy. It is hard for us to imagine the impact of the first sounds of the piece. This was not music among other musical pieces, but sounds that floated into a sonic space that had been empty for weeks. Only on Easter would cantatas be again performed in the Sunday morning service, would the organ play its long preludes, and would secular music and celebrations be “back to normal.”

Bach had come to Leipzig in 1723. When he performed his first passion (the first version of the *St. John Passion*, BWV 245) in 1724, the tradition of large-scale passion compositions had been quite young in the central German city. Only during the last years of Bach’s predecessor, Johann Kuhnau (1660–1722), had it become customary to perform a figural setting of the passion in the style of a large-scale oratorio during the vespers of Good Friday.⁶ (In this Leipzig followed other German cities, where a similar tradition had been introduced in the late seventeenth century.) The novelty might even have intensified the impact of Bach’s early passion performances in Leipzig, for not only did they break the silence of Lent, but this breaking of the sound of silence was something quite new—even in 1725, when Bach conducted the second version of his *St. John Passion*.

Versions of the Passion

According to the estate catalogue compiled by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel, Johann Sebastian Bach composed five passions.⁷ The two passions known today are based on the Gospels of John and Matthew. He also composed passions based on the evangelists Mark and Luke: the *St. Mark Passion* (BWV 247) can be partly reconstructed (the recitatives and chorales are missing),⁸ while the *St. Luke Passion* is lost. (A passion based on Luke, BWV 246, was for a long time attributed to Bach, but already in the 1970s Bach scholars were able to show that the piece was not composed by him.⁹)

The fifth setting of the passion mentioned by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach must have been composed during his father’s time as court musician in Weimar (1708–17).¹⁰ We know of it from court records, but no music that can be certainly attributed to this piece exists. Some scholars have suggested that a few pieces from the second (1725) version of the *St. John Passion* were actually remnants of this Weimar passion,¹¹ but we have no proof, and in some cases this is unlikely for stylistic reasons.¹²

The two surviving passions underwent numerous revisions. Bach reworked them several times, replacing movements, and changing texts and textures. Bach scholars have been able to reconstruct four different versions of the *St. John Passion*. The first was composed during Bach’s first year in Leipzig, and performed in the Good Friday vespers in 1724. During the next year the

piece underwent some significant revisions before the boys' choir of St. Thomas's sung it on Good Friday 1725. Around 1732, and towards the end of his life (probably around 1749), Bach made more revisions and restored some things he had changed in 1725.

During the 1725 revisions Bach made the following major changes:

- In the first movement "Herr unser Herrscher" was replaced by the chorale movement "O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß."
- Movement 11+ ("Himmel reiße, Welt erbebe") was added.
- Movement 13 ("Ach mein Sinn") was replaced by the aria "Zerschmettert mich."
- Movements 19 and 20 were replaced by the movement "Ach windet euch."
- Movement 33 ("Und siehe da, der Vorhang im Tempel zerriß") replaced an earlier version of the movement.
- The final movement ("Ach Herr, laß dein lieb Engelein") was replaced by the chorale setting "Christe, du Lamm Gottes."

These changes are significant for Bach's artistic development during the year following the first (1724) performance, and reflect especially his compositional interest in settings of Protestant hymns during the summer, fall, and winter of 1724. In his second year in Leipzig, Bach was occupied with the composition of his "Chorale Cantata Cycle," a cycle of cantatas for each Sunday and feast of the ecclesiastical year, based on Protestant hymns. He was unable to finish this project, probably owing to the death of his librettist, but the idea of using Protestant hymns as the main musical material in a composition still enticed him, and he inserted several hymn settings in his *St. John Passion*. Movements 1, 11+, and the last, which in part replaced older movements, are large-scale settings of Protestant hymns.

The most striking change in the 1725 version is the replacement of the first movement. While the version of the passion from 1724 started with a large-scale setting of the words "Herr, unser Herrscher, wie herrlich ist dein Ruhm in allen Landen" ("Lord, our ruler, whose praise is glorious in all the lands"), the second version begins with an amalgam of a vocal motet and an instrumental concerto based on the chorale "O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß" ("O humankind, bewail your great sin"). This replacement of the movement not only changes the musical character of the work but its theological profile as well. The first movement of a passion setting (called exordium) traditionally serves as a headline, a hermeneutic key to how the following narrative is to be understood. While the text from 1724 provides the headline "Lord our ruler," emphasizing the glory of God, the new headline "beware your great sin" focuses on human sin and on how humanity caused the suffering of Jesus Christ. While the original first movement is close to the theology of the passion of Christ found in the Gospel according to John, the new movement is theologically much closer to the theology of other gospels, like Matthew's.¹³

Texts and Contexts

We do not know whether the changes were made for theological reasons; we do not even know who compiled the texts for the libretto of Bach's *St. John Passion*. However, the changes affect the theological profile of the piece, and they also affect the liturgical connections of the passion, as we will see later. But first we will focus on the texts put together by the unknown librettist that served Bach as a basis for his composition. The libretto of Bach's *St. John Passion* is a mixture of different text-genres:

Text genres

Biblical texts	Recitatives, Turba-choruses
Free poetry	Aria, Choruses
Hymns	Arias, Hymn settings

Authors of free poetry:

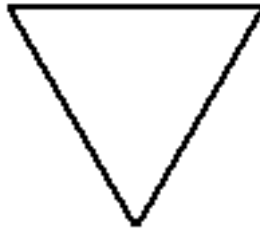
Barthold Heinrich Brockes
Christian Weise
Christian Heinrich Postel
Anonymous

Biblical texts from the Gospel according to John serve as a backbone for the entire libretto. Other texts are Protestant hymns and free poetry that contain reflections on the passion narrative. These free poetic texts are the biggest problem when it comes to determining authorship. Several arias are borrowed from a passion libretto by Barthold Heinrich Brockes (1680–1747), one of the most successful eighteenth century passion texts.¹⁴ Brockes's text is known (and notorious) for its very graphic descriptions of the wounds and suffering of Jesus. Other aria-texts were taken from writings by Christian Weise (1642–1708) and Christian Heinrich Postel (1658–1705). For several of the aria-texts we do not know the author. Finally, we find two short passages from the Gospel according to Matthew (26:75 and 27:51–52) embedded in the biblical text from the Gospel according to John.

We can only speculate who compiled the libretto for Bach's passion. One of the theologians in Leipzig may have done it, and Bach may have written some of the poetic texts himself. Clearer than the attribution of the text to different authors, however, is the function of the texts in the passion libretto that was set by Bach. The different text genres represent different layers of time and space, and of individual and collective reflection on the passion narrative.

Christian Congregation

Individual Believer



Biblical Narrative

The different genres stand in a complex intertextual relationship. The biblical text provides the narrative, situated in the time of Jesus. The arias represent an observer, reflecting on the passion. This observer is beyond time, for he (or she) can be present at the time of the crucifixion, and also a reader of the biblical narrative, contemplating the suffering of Christ (and its meaning) from his (her) own perspective. In other words, the observer can be in Jerusalem, Leipzig, or New Haven. The hymns, finally, represent the reaction of the Christian congregation, here and now. The hymns help bridge the narrative of the passion and the congregation. Hymns are the pieces that “belong” to the congregation, and they connect the passion and the liturgy.

Thus the addition of more hymns in the 1725 version strengthened the connection of *Bach's St. John Passion* to the liturgy.

We have already pointed out how its context in the ecclesiastical year affects the perception of the *St. John Passion* (and all of Bach's passion settings, for that matter). Even more significant is the direct liturgical context of the passion. Here too eighteenth century practices were different from ours today. A listener in the early twenty-first century goes to a performance of the passion intending to listen to Bach's music. The *St. John Passion*, because of its length, is normally the only piece on the program. In 1725 the *St. John Passion* was part of the Good Friday vespers, and was embedded in a liturgy:

Hymn "Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund"
Bach, *St. John Passion* (part 1)
Hymn "Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend"
Sermon
Bach, *St. John Passion* (part 2)
Motet "Ecce, quomodo moritur justus" (Jacobus Gallus)
Collect prayer
Biblical verse "Die Strafe liegt auf ihm" (Isaiah 53:5)
Hymn "Nun danket alle Gott"

Taking into account that a seventeenth or eighteenth century sermon took about one hour, we can realistically assume that the entire vespers service lasted at least three-and-a-half hours. Bach's setting of the passion narrative would have occupied the most time, but each of its parts, about one hour in length, was balanced by a sermon of approximately the same length.

Not only was the temporal framework different, but the liturgy also contributed to a synthesis of meaning for the passion. The liturgy began with a hymn of the congregation, *Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund* ("As Jesus hung upon the cross"), a chorale based on the Seven Words of Christ on the cross. The hymn is already a summary of Christ's passion before the first chord of Bach's passion setting has sounded. The last stanza of the hymn emphasizes the soteriological meaning of Christ's suffering:

Wer Jesus ehret immerfort
und oft gedenkt der sieben Wort,
des wird auch Gott gedenken
und ihm durch seines Sohnes Tod
das ewig Leben schenken.

Who honors Jesus constantly,
and often remembers the seven Words,
will be remembered by God as well
and he will give him through the death of his son eternal life.

The final words of the hymn set the scene for Bach's passion setting: if you keep in mind the words of Christ, the passion, then you will have eternal life. Bach's setting, by retelling and reflecting on the story of the passion, fulfills a part of this remembering. The first movement in the 1725 version of the *St. John Passion*, which followed this congregational hymn, serves as an

opening for the passion narrative, but is also a repetition of the soteriological perspective. Now, however, the emphasis is on the incarnation of Christ, and his sacrifice, as the prerequisite for people's salvation:

O Mensch, beweine dein Sünde groß
Darum Christus seines Vaters Schoß
Äußert und kam auf Erden;
Von einer Jungfrau rein und zart
Für uns er hie geboren ward,
Er wollt der Mittler werden.
Den Toten er das Leben gab
Und legt darbei all Krankheit ab,
Bis sich die Zeit herdrange,
Daß er für uns geopfert würd,
Trüg unser Sünden schwerde Bürd
Wohl an dem Kreuze lange.

O humankind, bewail your great sin,
for which Christ gave up his Father's bosom
and came to earth.
Of a virgin pure and tender
he was born here, for us:
it was his will that he become the mediator.
The dead he gave life,
and in so doing put away every illness,
until the time pressed forth
that he would be sacrificed for us,
bearing the heavy burden of our sin
long indeed upon the cross.¹⁵

The two hymn stanzas, juxtaposed by the order of the liturgy, highlight two sides of the same coin. The prerequisite for the salvation of men is the incarnation and suffering of Christ, but this act has to be remembered, and by being internalized it has to be brought into our own times.

The internalization of the passion is one of the key theologumena of Lutheran theology. Luther emphasized in his writings that every theology has to be a theology of the cross, *theologia crucis*.¹⁶ Ahasver Fritsch, one of the most successful authors of religious literature and poetry in the second half of the seventeenth century, summarized this theology of the cross and its core importance for discipleship in a short exegesis of Luke 14:27, "Wer nicht sein Creutz trägt / und mir nach folget / der kann nicht mein Jünger seyn" ("Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple"):

Gleichwie die Kinder bey der Heiligen Tauffe / mit dem heil. Creutze an der Stirn
und auff der Brust bezeichnet werden / so wäre zu wünschen / daß den
Täuflingen das heilsam Erkänntniß des Geheimnüßes des Creutzes Christi
gleichsam mit der Muttermilch eingeflöset / und durch das gantze Leben
hindurch immer in ihnen wachsen und zunehmen möge. Denn Christus / der
König und Fürst des Leidens / hat in unser Tauff einen Bund des Leidens mit uns

allen / die wir an seinen Nahmen glauben / gemacht. Seine Lehre / und Gebote waren so eingerichtet / daß sie uns Leiden und Trübsal aufflegten: Seine Verheissungen selbst waren Leiden in diesem Leben / und der Belohnung des Leidens nach dieser Zeit. [...] Wir haben obigen Spruch unsers Heylandes nie recht gefasset / noch fassen und verstehen wollen. Er saget mit ausdrücklichen Worten zu uns allen: Wer nicht sein Creutz trägt / und mir nachfolget / der kann NB. nicht mein Jünger seyn. Er kann kein Christe seyn / und also hat er kein Theil an mir / dem Gecreutzigsten [sic!].¹⁷

In the same way as children are signed in their baptism with the sign of the cross on forehead and breast, one might wish that the understanding of the secret of the cross of Christ might be given with their mother's milk, and that it might increase and grow in them throughout their entire lives. Christ, the king and prince of suffering, has made baptism a covenant of suffering with all who believe in his name. His teachings and commandments were made such that they give us suffering and distress; his prophecies promised suffering in this life and a reward for this suffering at the end of time. ... We have never understood the biblical verse, and we have never tried. It tells us: Whoever does not bear his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. He cannot be a Christian, and he cannot be a part of me, the Crucified.

Discipleship and commemoration on the cross are linked together. Only in the remembrance of the cross can a human being be a disciple. In one of his early writings Luther emphasized the *theologia crucis* over all other kinds of Christian devotion. He points out that meditation on the cross has to focus on the soteriological meaning of Christ's suffering, and on the fact that it was human sins that caused the suffering:

Some point to the manifold benefits and fruits that grow from contemplating Christ's passion. There is a saying ascribed to Albertus [Magnus] about this, that it is more beneficial to ponder Christ's passion just once than to fast a whole year or to pray a psalm daily etc. These people follow this saying blindly and therefore do not reap the fruit of Christ's passion, for in so doing they are seeking their own advantage. They carry pictures and booklets, letters and crosses on their person. Some who travel afar do this in the belief that they protect themselves against water and sword, fire, and all sorts of perils. Christ's suffering is thus used to effect in them a lack of suffering contrary to his being and nature ... You must [however] get this thought through your head and not doubt about that you are the one who is torturing Christ thus, for your sins have surely wrought this. ... For every nail that pierces Christ, more than one hundred thousand should in justice pierce you yes, they should prick you forever and ever more painfully!¹⁸

The two stanzas, the last one of the congregational hymn and the chorale stanza in the first movement of the *St. John Passion*, thus encompass the two facets of a Lutheran meditation on the cross. The passion has to be remembered, but since the reason for Christ's suffering are people's sins, the remembrance has eventually to lead to discipleship, to following Christ's cross. *Theologia crucis* is soteriology and ethics at the same time.

Failing Discipleship

The first half of the passion setting by Bach, performed before the sermon, covers the narrative of Christ's suffering from the betrayal of Judas until the denial of Peter. Most listeners attending a modern performance will not notice the bipartite structure of the passion. Only the otherwise unusual hiatus of two hymn stanzas, one ending the first part and one opening the second, marks the transition from part one to part two.

In 1725 the final chorale of the first part, meditating on the denial of Peter, was followed by a hymn of the congregation, "Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend" ("Lord Jesus Christ, turn to us"). The hymn was one of the usual ones sung by the congregation before the sermon. Again, however, the flow of the liturgy adds a particular meaning to the passion setting by Bach. For this, we have to look at the entire scene of Peter's denial.

The biblical text from John 18:27 reports Peter's third denial and the crowing of the cock. The unknown compiler of the libretto interpolated after this a short passage from the Gospel according to Matthew, reporting the weeping of the disciple:

Da verleugnete Petrus abermal, und also bald krähete der Hahn.
Da gedachte Petrus an die Worte Jesu und ging hinaus und weinete bitterlich.
Then Peter denied it once more, and immediately the cock crowed (John 18:27).
Then Peter remembered the words of Jesus and went out and wept bitterly
(Matt 26:75).

The combination of texts from different gospels was not unusual. Passion harmonies had a long tradition, and the "passion harmony" by Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558) was traditionally interpreted in the sermons at Vespers in Leipzig during Lent.¹⁹ In this case, however, the inclusion of the text from the Gospel according to Matthew served a clear purpose. It was the librettist's intention to increase the emotional impact of the scene. The disciple's weeping makes the whole section much more memorable than the bare fact of his denial as it was reported in the Gospel according to John. Bach's setting of the biblical text emphasizes this emotional quality. The otherwise simple texture of the setting (a *recitativo secco* with a "dry" accompaniment) leads into an *arioso* with long chromatic melismas on the word "weinet" (wept) (see example 1).

Recitativo, mm. 31–38

example 1 Bach, *St. John Passion* BWV 245a, 12c:

31 Evangelista adagio

Da ge-dach-te Pe-trus an die Wor-te Je-su und ging hin-aus und wei-

35

- ne-te bit-ter-lich, und wei- - - - - ne-te bit- - - - - ter-lich.

The setting, although it emphasizes the dramatic quality of the text, has not only that function, but also points to the theological center of the scene: Peter’s denial is not only a story that happened in the past, but denying Jesus Christ is something that happens again and again. Peter is a model for the believer, both in a negative way (everybody is in danger of denying Jesus) and also in a positive way (one who denies Jesus should feel sorry and weep about this). The following aria in the 1725 version—a piece that replaced another aria in the first version—points this out:

Zerschmettert mich, ihr Felsen und ihr Hügel,
 Wirf Himmel deinen Strahl auf mich!
 Wie freventlich, wie sündlich, wie vermessen,
 Hab ich, o Jesus, dein vergessen.
 Ja, nähm ich der Morgenröte Flügel,
 So holte mich mein strenger Richter wieder;
 Ach! fällt vor ihm in bitteren Tränen nieder!

Crush me, you rocks and you hills;
 heaven, cast your thunderbolt upon me!
 How outrageously, how sinful, how arrogantly,
 have I forgotten you, o Jesus.
 Yes, if I take the wings of the morning,
 then my stern judge [Jesus] shall fetch me back;
 Oh! bow down before him with bitter tears!²⁰

This is not Peter speaking, but the individual believer meditating on the meaning and the consequences of Peter’s (and his own) denial. Bach sets the text appropriately in the tradition of an operatic rage aria, with aggressive repetitions of sixteenth notes, furious, thunder-like thirty-second scales in the strings, and a nervously leaping tenor voice. The aria oscillates between these aggressive sections and an *arioso*-like *parlando*, before finally the aggressiveness gives way to a lyric setting of the last line of the aria: “Oh! bow down before him with bitter tears!” The melodic line on “Tränen” (“tears”) in the aria resembles the melisma on “weinete” (“wept”)

in the preceding recitative, thus underscoring the textual (and theological) connection between the two movements through the means of music (see example 2).

example 2 BWV 245a, 13II: Aria, mm. 7–8 and 38–42

The image shows two systems of a musical score. The first system covers measures 7-8 and the second system covers measures 38-42. The top staff is for the Tenor voice, and the bottom two staves are for the piano accompaniment. The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

The aria is followed by a hymn sung by the choir, shifting the individual's desperation about denial to a communal level. Not only Peter, the individual, but the congregation (or the church), is prone to deny Jesus:

Petrus, der nicht denkt zurück,
Seinen Gott verneinet
Der doch auf ein' ernsten Blick
Bitterlichen weinet.
Jesu, blicke mich auch an,
Wenn ich nicht will büßen;
Wenn ich Böses hab getan,
Rühre mein Gewissen!

Peter, who does not think
back [to Jesus' Word],
denies his God;
at a penetrating glance, however,
he weeps bitterly.
Jesus, glance on me as well,
whenever I am unrepentant;
whenever I have done something evil,
stir my conscience.²¹

The text aims to move the listener. The example of Peter, his weeping, is the negative example, a warning but also consolation. It is supposed to “stir the conscience” of the congregation—and Bach's emotional and expressive setting underscores this. As Luther explained in his “Meditation

on Christ's Passion":

We must give ourselves wholly to this matter, for the main benefit of Christ's passion is that man sees into his own true self and that he be terrified and crushed by this. Unless we seek that knowledge, we do not derive much benefit from Christ's passion. The real and true work of Christ's passion is to make us conformable to Christ, so that man's conscience is tormented by his sins in like measure as Christ was pitifully tormented in body and soul by our sins.²²

The dramatic description of Christ's suffering has the purpose of "crushing" the listener, as both the text of the aria "Crush me, you rocks and you hills" and Luther's meditation emphasize.

The last scene of the first half of Bach's *Passion* gives the following hymn a second meaning. I already pointed out that "Herr Jesu Christ dich zu uns wend" was often sung before the sermon. Directly after Peter's denial, however, and the reflections on failing discipleship, the words acquire a new subtext:

Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend,
Dein Heiligen Geist du zu uns send;
mit Hilf und Gnad er uns regier
und uns den Weg zur Wahrheit führ.

Lord Jesu Christ turn to us,
send your Holy Spirit to us,
rule us, Lord, with help and grace,
and show us the way to truth.²³

Both hymns, the final hymn of the first half of Bach's *Passion* and the hymn sung by the congregation, ask for Jesus' merciful glance: "Jesus, glance on me as well" and "Lord Jesu Christ turn to us." The congregational hymn, of course, is referring to the following sermon, and the congregation asks for the right spirit to understand it. However, the words of the hymn also reiterate the wish from the preceding hymn sung by the choir. The word of God is the primary way God turns himself towards humans: God is present in his word. Hence the sermon, which interrupts the flow of Bach's setting of the passion, is the natural continuation of the passion text set by Bach. Peter, as the last hymn emphasized, did forget the words of Jesus, and this led to sin. The commemoration of the words of Jesus leads to an existence that stays away from sin—and the sermon is the very place where this commemoration of the words of Jesus takes place. It is the place where Jesus glances on the congregation through his word, and where he, to quote the congregational hymn, "shows us the way to truth."

We do not know what the sermon on Good Friday 1725 was about. Traditionally, Bugenhagen's "passion harmony" served as a basis for sermons during Lent. We can, however, safely assume that the sermon focused on the death of Jesus and its soteriological meaning.

A Threefold Finale

The second half of Bach's composition reports the trial of Jesus, his torture, crucifixion, and burial. It is again framed by two hymns. The first one is a simple four part setting of "Christus, der uns selig macht" ("Christ, who makes us blessed"). The words summarize his arrest and

torment, thus bridging the gap between part one and part two of the *Passion*.

The *Passion* ends with a threefold “finale.” After the burial, which is reported in a recitative, the choir sings an extensive setting of the text “Ruhe wohl.” The texture is simple, and the calm triple meter resembles a lullaby. The setting is a farewell to Jesus, but it is also a supplication that the “holy bones” that are buried in peace will give peace to the believer:

Ruht wohl, ihr heiligen Gebeine,
Die ich nun weiter nicht beweine,
Ruht wohl und bringt auch mich zur Ruh!
Das Grab, so euch bestimmet ist
Und ferner keine Not umschließt,
Macht mir den Himmel auf und schließt die Hölle zu.

Be fully at peace, you holy bones,
which I will no longer bewail;
be fully at peace and bring me too to this peace!
The grave—which is appointed for you, and from now on no distress will enclose—
opens to me [the gates of] heaven and closes [the gates of] hell.

This setting was followed in the first version of the *St. John Passion* in 1724 by a simple hymn setting, “Ach Herr, lass dein lieb’ Engelein” (“Oh Lord, let your dear little angels”), extending the reflection about the death and its anagogic meaning. In the second version of the passion, in 1725, this simple movement was replaced by an extensive setting of the German *Agnus Dei*, “Christe, du Lamm Gottes” (“Christ, Lamb of God”). Bach reused an older movement he had composed in Köthen and inserted in his audition cantata for Leipzig on February 7, 1723.²⁴ This movement broadens the view, asking Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, for his mercy and peace. The final hymn setting serves a dual purpose. First, it represents once more the congregation’s thought, reacting to the death of Christ and asking for his mercy. Secondly, it puts the entire *Passion* in a larger liturgical context. The German *Agnus Dei*, like its Latin model, was part of the liturgy of the Eucharist, the celebration of the forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ and the commemoration of this death. By placing the *Agnus Dei* at the end of the *Passion*, Bach (or his unknown librettist) draws a connection between the passion narrative and the celebration of salvation through the very events that were reported in this narrative. The introduction of the German *Agnus Dei* in the *Passion* is the mirror image of the connection between Passion and Mass Luther emphasized in his *Meditation on Christ’s Passion* from 1519: “the mass was not instituted for its own worthiness, but to make us worthy and to remind us of the passion of Christ.”²⁵

On a musical level, the extended setting of the chorale balances the likewise extensive hymn setting Bach composed as a new first movement for the 1725 version of the passion. The chorale is dressed in a complex vocal and instrumental texture, not simply presented in a four-part setting as was the last hymn of the 1724 version.

The two movements also show some differences owed to Bach’s own progress as a composer. The new first movement was composed in early 1725, and exhibits Bach’s experience in combining a complex polyphonic vocal texture (almost like a chorale motet) and a concerto-like instrumental accompaniment. The vocal and instrumental layers in the movement are independent and completely balanced. The final movement, on the other hand, is about two

years older, and was composed before Bach's compositional experiments during the chorale cantata cycle of 1724–25.²⁶ In this bipartite movement the emphasis shifts from the instrumental layer in the first half to the vocal layer in the second half. In the first section, a mostly homophonic chorale setting is embedded in a motivally and texturally dominant instrumental accompaniment (see mm. 4–7 in example 3). In the second section the vocal layer becomes more polyphonic and the voice-leading independent, but this goes on at the cost of the instruments, which now mostly double the vocal parts (see mm. 19–22 in example 3) and only gain some independence in the interludes.

example 3 BWV 245a, 40II: Choral, mm. 4–7 and 19–22

The image displays a musical score for BWV 245a, 40II: Choral, mm. 4–7 and 19–22. The score is in G minor, common time, and consists of two sections: "Adagio" (mm. 4–7) and "Andante" (mm. 19–22). The "Adagio" section features a homophonic chorale setting with a dominant instrumental accompaniment. The "Andante" section features a more polyphonic vocal layer with independent voice-leading, while the instruments mostly double the vocal parts.

Adagio

Chri - ste, du Lamm Got - - tes,
 Chri - ste, du Lamm Got - tes, du Lamm Got - tes,
 Chri - ste, du Lamm Got - - - tes,
 Chri - ste, du Lamm Got - tes, du Lamm Got - - - tes,

Andante

Chri - ste, du Lamm Got - tes
 Chri - ste du Lamm Got - tes, du Lamm Got - tes, du Lamm Got - tes
 Chri - ste du Lamm Got - tes, Chri - te, du Lamm Got - tes,
 Chri - ste du Lamm Got - - - tes, Chri - ste, du Lamm Got - tes

Most of the churchgoers on Good Friday 1725, however, would not have noticed this remarkable change in Bach's style and in his ability as a composer—and he probably did not intend them to do that. What they might have noticed, though, is that the passion was balanced by two large scaled hymn settings, serving as exordium and conclusio for the passion narrative.

The last part of the threefold “finale,” mentioned above, does not belong to the actual setting by Bach. It is a Latin motet by Jacobus Gallus (1550–1591), traditionally performed in Leipzig after the passion. Again, this piece affects the perception of the passion setting by Bach. The entire narrative of the passion is now summarized by the ancient motet:

Ecce quomodo moritur justus
et nemo percipit corde.
Viri justi tolluntur
et nemo considerat.
A facie iniquitatis
sublatus est justus
et erit in pace memoria eius:
in pace factus est locus ejus
et in Sion habitatio eius
et erit in pace memoria eius.

Behold how the righteous dies
and no one takes notice.
The righteous are taken away
and no one pays attention.
From facing iniquity
the righteous is removed,
and his memory will be in peace:
his (resting) place is in peace
and his dwelling place in Zion,
and his memory will be in peace.

Jesus is the just one who died for the sins of humans. The motet was composed in the sixteenth century; its musical style is significantly different from the music in Bach’s passion. Even for an uneducated listener it sounds like (and is) a commentary from another time. At the same time, the motet picks up two central keywords from the previous liturgical context: “memory” and “peace.” The memory is of the suffering righteous, of the suffering of Christ that the passion revolves around, and to which the very first hymn of the liturgy already alluded. In “peace” the bones of Jesus will rest in the grave, and also the bones of the believer, according to the second but last movement of the *Passion*. And the final German *Agnus Dei* asks *dona nobis pacem*, “give us peace.”

After a reading of Isaiah 53:5²⁷ (which was probably rather a cantillation of the text), echoing the “peace” that was mentioned in the two most recent musical pieces, the congregation concluded with the hymn *Nun danket alle Gott* (“Now thank you all our God”), a popular thanksgiving hymn from the seventeenth century. Similar to the *Te Deum*, which it sometimes replaced or complemented during liturgies in Leipzig and other places,²⁸ *Nun danket alle Gott* was a hymn universally used to thank God. It could be employed in the intimate liturgical settings of Matins, in a regular Sunday morning service, or to celebrate victory in a battle.²⁹ Like the hymn before the sermon, *Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend*, the song was not specifically associated with the passion. However, in this context it is a thanksgiving hymn for the dying of the just, and for the salvation that comes through the death of Jesus.

As mentioned earlier, the libretto of Bach's composition is a compilation not only of different authors and genres but also of different layers in time. Biblical text, reflection of an individual, and reaction of the congregation (represented in Bach's *Passion* by the choir singing the hymns) alternate and complement each other. The liturgy of Good Friday as a whole is a similar compilation of genres and times. Biblical texts, hymns, a sixteenth century composition, and a sermon also alternate and complement each other. The congregation interjects three times with its own voice in the form of hymns: first a hymn about the Seven Last Words of Christ (foreshadowing the entire passion in a nutshell and culminating in the admonition to commemorate Christ's suffering). The second is a hymn asking for Christ's merciful love and care. This care is given especially through his word, which is, again, the mode in which we commemorate him. The final hymn is a reaction to the entire passion narrative and the sermon, a hymn of thanksgiving, calling to memory all the good things God has done for people since their childhood.

The liturgy for Good Friday celebrates the remembrance of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The remembrance is based on the biblical narrative, which is, according to Lutheran dogmatic theology of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, given by the Holy Spirit. The leading Lutheran theologian of the first half of the seventeenth century, Johann Gerhard, calls the Bible the letter from God: "[Scriptura sacra e]st enim epistola Dei e coelo ad nos missa ..." ³⁰ ("Scripture is a letter from God, sent to us from heaven ..."). Scripture is the way God communicates with the world, and hence the memory of him through Scripture is the mode of his presence. People can react to this memory, and this is what both the liturgy for Good Friday and Bach's setting in particular do: they are reactions *to* and commemorations *of* the passion of Christ. An essential part of this commemoration, though, is the Lutheran *pro me*, the question, "What does this mean *for me*?" The final hymn of the congregation points this out: "Now thank we all our God ... who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way." Soteriology is not a theoretical dogmatic concept, but it affects both the individual and the congregation: *pro me* and *pro nobis*.

We encounter a similar concept in the libretto of Bach's *Passion* (and eventually in his composition as well) when we look at Peter's denial. First comes the biblical text (in Gerhard's thought, the memory we receive from God's letter). This is then interpreted from the perspective of the individual in the aria "Zerschmettert mich, ihr Felsen und ihr Hügel" ("Crush me, you rocks and you hills"), before finally the congregation asks for Christ's love and care: Jesus, glance on me as well.

The memory of Christ is celebrated in the liturgy; the memory of his death is especially celebrated in the Lord's Supper. The individuals of the congregation gather at the table of the Lord to celebrate his presence under bread and wine, and to commemorate his death and resurrection as the basis for salvation. The final movement of the 1725 version of Bach's *St. John Passion* draws this connection between the passion narrative and the liturgy, between Good Friday and the Lord's Supper, that is celebrated in the Sunday morning service.

Audible Intertextuality

The interaction and simultaneity of the memory and commemoration through the individual and the congregation becomes visible (and audible) in one other movement Bach added in his 1725 version. The aria "Himmel reiße, Welt erbebe" ("Heaven, tear apart; world, quake") is a

complex amalgam of an aria and a chorale. Bach again establishes two distinct layers that are most of the time independent: a rage-aria (not unlike the one towards the end of the first part of the *Passion*) accompanied by two flutes and basso continuo, and the hymn “Jesu meine Passion” (“Jesus, my Passion”), here sung only by the soprano. The texts, however, are not entirely independent; the chorale text is integrated into the rhyme scheme of the free poetry. The word “Trauerton” rhymes on “Passion,” the word “Freude” rhymes on “leide” and so on (the chorale text is indented):

Himmel reiße, Welt erbebe,
Fallt in meinen Trauerton,
 Jesu, deine Passion,
 ist mir lauter Freude,
Sehet meine Qual und Angst,
Was ich, Jesu, mit dir leide
Ja zähle deine Schmerzen,
O zerschlagner Gottessohn,
 Deine Wunden, Kron und Hohn
 meines Herzens Weide.
Ich erwähle Golgatha
vor dies schnöde Weltgebäude.
Werden auf den Kreuzeswegen
deine Dornen ausgesät,
 Meine Seel auf Rosen geht,
 wenn ich dran gedenke
Weil ich in Zufriedenheit
mich in deine Wunden senke,
So erblicke ich in dem Sterben,
wenn ein stürmend Wetter weht,
 In dem Himmel eine Stätt
 mir deswegen schenke!
Diesen Ort, dahin ich mich
täglich durch den Glauben lenke!

Heaven, tear apart; world, quake, fall in with my air of grief
 Jesus, your Passion is pure joy to me;
look at my sorrow and fear:
what I suffer with you, Jesus!
Yes, I do count up your agonies,
o shattered Son of God;
 your wounds, crown, and scorn my heart's pasture.
I choose Golgotha before this vile earthly vault.
Should your thorns be sown on the path of the cross,
 My soul walks on roses, when I reflect on it;
because I in contentment submerge myself into your wounds,
I will recognize, at my death, when a stormy tempest roars,
 grant me a place in heaven because of it!
this spot, where by faith I daily direct myself.³¹

The bass-voice is highly virtuosic, underscoring the affect of the text, while the hymn in the soprano proceeds at a calm pace. Bach juxtaposes the rage of the bass (“Heaven, tear apart; world, quake”) with the calmness of the hymn (probably here again personifying the congregation), which already knows about the soteriological meaning of all that is about to happen and which therefore can praise the joy that results from the passion of Christ (see example 4). The individual has to go some way to arrive at knowledge the congregation has from the very beginning of the movement: the passion is the path to salvation. The memory of the church (hymn) is juxtaposed with the emotional reaction of the individual. Each depends on the other and complements the other. Collective memory, and individual memory and experience, intersect.

example 4 BWV 245a, 11+: Aria, mm. 7–12

The image shows a musical score for the bass voice and keyboard accompaniment of the Aria from BWV 245a, measures 7-12. The score is in G major and common time. The bass voice part is highly virtuosic, with rapid sixteenth-note passages. The keyboard accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand. The lyrics are: "Himmel rei - ße, Wel - ter - ße, be, fällt in mei - nen Trau - er - ton, Je - su dei - ne Pas - si - on, fällt in mei - nen Trau - er - ton, in mei - nen Trau - er - ton."

Bach’s *St. John Passion* is too long to be performed in today’s liturgies. Two hours and more of music do not fit into our worship schedules. And I have doubts that we should integrate his passion into our liturgies. Our way of celebrating Good Friday has changed, as has our way of listening to Bach’s music. Performing the *Passion* in a concert is probably better. However, looking at the original liturgical context of the piece, and in particular at the way the composition was integrated in and interacted with the other elements of the liturgy, can lead us to a deeper understanding both of the theological context of Bach’s work and of the piece in general.

I mentioned at the beginning that Bach’s *St. John Passion* was part of the soundscape of the liturgical year. It briefly interrupted the silence of Lent. After the Good Friday vespers in Leipzig the congregation went home—ideally further meditating on the passion of Christ. Only on Easter Sunday would this silence be over, and the instruments would return into the church to praise the resurrection of Christ. The cantata Bach performed on Easter Sunday was the Chorale Cantata *Christ lag in Todes Banden* (BWV 4). This complements the passion in an interesting way. It is based entirely on a Lutheran hymn, and thus corresponds to the hymn-based movements Bach added in the second version of the *St. John Passion*.

ENDNOTES

1. See Martin Geck, *Die Wiederentdeckung der Matthäuspassion im 19. Jahrhundert: Die zeitgenössischen Dokumente und ihre ideengeschichtliche Deutung*. Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts 9 (Regensburg: Bosse, 1967); Celia Applegate, *Bach in Berlin: Nation and Culture in Mendelssohn's Revival of the 'St. Matthew Passion'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).
2. Martin Geck provides a brief overview of the "sonic environment" of Bach's music in his article "Bach als Genrekompontist. Akustische Umwelt in seinen Werken," in his *"Denn alles findet bei Bach statt" Erforschtes und Erfahrenes* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000), 56–74.
3. Regarding BWV 127 see Friedhelm Krummacher, *Bachs Zyklus der Choralkantaten. Aufgaben und Lösungen*. Veröffentlichung der Joachim Jungius-Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften Hamburg 81 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 133–45.
4. See Martin Petzoldt, "Liturgie und Musik in den Leipziger Hauptkirchen," in *Die Welt der Bach-Kantaten III: Johann Sebastian Bachs Leipziger Kirchenkantaten*, ed. Christoph Wolff (Stuttgart/Kassel: Metzler/Bärenreiter, 1999), 69–93, esp. the synopsis of the different types of liturgies on pp. 85–86.
5. See Anton Baumstark, "Das Gesetz der Erhaltung des Alten in liturgisch hochwertiger Zeit," *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* 7 (1927): 1–23.
6. See Petzoldt, "Liturgie und Musik," 83–84; Daniel R. Melamed, *Hearing Bach's Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.
7. See Alfred Dürr, "Zu den verschollenen Passionen Bachs," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 38 (1949/50): 81–99.
8. See for a short overview Melamed, *Passions*, 97–110.
9. See Robert L. Marshall, "Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works," *Musical Quarterly* 62 (1976), 313–57, and Melamed, *Passions*, 111–30.
10. See Andreas Glöckner, "Neue Spuren zu Bachs 'Weimarer' Passion," in *Bericht über die Wissenschaftliche Konferenz anlässlich des 69. Bach-Festes der Neuen Bachgesellschaft* [=LBzBF 1], ed. H. J. Schulze et al. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1995), 33–46.
11. Alfred Dürr, *Die Johannes-Passion von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 21992), 17–19.
12. Markus Rathey, "Weimar, Gotha oder Leipzig: Zur Chronologie der Arie 'Himmel reiße' in der zweiten Fassung der Johannes Passion (BWV 245/11+)," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 91 (2005): 291–300.
13. See Gerhard Barth, *Der Tod Jesu Christi im Verständnis des Neuen Testaments* (Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 1992), 106–47.
14. On Brockes and his passion libretto see Henning Frederichs, *Das Verhältnis von Text und Musik in den Brockespassionen Keisers, Händels, Telemanns und Matthesons* (Munich:

Katzbichler, 1975).

15. Translation by Michael Marissen.

16. In his *Heidelberg Disputation* from 1518 Luther emphasized that “he deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. ... Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. ... A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.” From *Martin Luther: Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 43–44. We find traces of this theology in Bach’s *B minor Mass*; see Markus Rathey, “Johann Sebastian Bach’s Mass in B Minor: The Greatest Artwork of All Times and All People,” in *Colloquium 2* (2005), 68.

17. Ahasver Fritsch, *Kurtze und heilsame Betrachtungen / Sechs und Achtzig auserlesene Biblische Sprüche / an statt Andern Theils Der Biblischen Moral-Sprüche* (Mühlhausen: Michael Kayser, 1702), 53–55, translation by MR. See also Markus Rathey, “Two unlikely sisters. The ‘Cross’ and the ‘crosses’ in BWV 12 and 69a,” *Bach XXXVIII/1* (2007): 1–8.

18. From “A Meditation on Christ’s Passion (1519),” in *Martin Luther: Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Lull, 165–67.

19. See Petzoldt, “Liturgie und Musik,” 89.

20. Translation by Michael Marissen.

21. Translation by Michael Marissen.

22. “A Meditation on Christ’s Passion,” 168.

23. Translation by Peter Williams, *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 296.

24. See Christoph Wolff, “Bach’s Audition for the St. Thomas Cantorate: The Cantata ‘Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn,’” in his *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 128–40.

25. “A Meditation on Christ’s Passion,” 166.

26. Regarding Bach’s progress as a composer during 1724/25 see Krummacher, *Bachs Zyklus der Chorkantaten*; and a shorter overview in Markus Rathey, “Christmas 1723—Johann Sebastian Bach’s Artistic Progress,” *Choral-Journal* (2007): 14–23.

27. “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

28. See Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 3d ed. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1921), 2:101f., and Günther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach und das Leipziger gottesdienstliche Leben seiner Zeit* (Kassel/Basel: Bärenreiter, 1970), 70.

29. The most famous use of the hymn in the context of a war is the battle of Leuthen, after which Frederic II made his people sing the song. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the hymn was often called “Der Choral from Leuthen” (“The Anthem of Leuthen”); see Bernhard Kroener, “‘Nun danket alle Gott!’ Der Choral von Leuthen und Friedrich der Große als protestantischer Held. Die Produktion politischer Mythen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert,” in *“Gott mit uns”. Religion, Nation und Gewalt im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. H. Lehmann and G. Krumeich (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 105–34.

30. Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, Locus I, Caput XXVI, § 538, quoted after the new edition by v. Ed. Preuss (Berlin: Schlawitz, 1863).

31. Translation by Michael Marissen.

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