

Staffing J. S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion Then and Now

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We have learned a great deal about how J. S. Bach performed passion music, and have come to recognize that his presentations were very different from most in our time. This has consequences not only for the sound of the compositions but also for the way we think about them. Even if we choose to perform Bach's passions with modern forces along modern lines, we can learn a great deal by considering them from the perspective of Bach's own presentations, particularly with respect to the way he organized and thought about his performing forces. I want to consider three aspects of the *St. Matthew Passion* here: the disposition of voices, the performance of dramatic roles, and (of special significance for this work) the use of a double chorus. In each, understanding eighteenth-century practices and thinking can help us hear modern performances in new ways. It can also remind us that the meaning of a musical composition does not lie in its score alone, but depends greatly on the work's execution in performance.

Vocal Forces

We need to begin with the recognition that early eighteenth-century German church musicians thought about singers in vocal/instrumental music differently than we do. We typically divide singers into two categories, chorus members and soloists, and tend to be pretty sure who is responsible for performing what. The recitatives and ornate arias, it seems clear, are for the soloists, and the ensemble pieces ("choruses") are for the choir. Soloists wear especially nice clothing, have chairs up front, stand up when it is their turn to sing and sit down after they finish, and are often professionals paid for their services. Chorus members stand or sit in the back and are often volunteers.

This is not how Bach and his contemporaries saw things. As every eighteenth-century German church musician understood, ensemble vocal music was indeed designed for two kinds of singers, but they did not fall into the modern categories of "soloist" and "chorus member." The first kind was essential to a performance. These necessary singers were called "concertists," and they had duties just like those of the principal ("concertante") players) in an instrumental concerto, presenting solo music framed and accompanied by the more anonymous ensemble that supports them.

In a vocal concerto—the term for the sort of work represented by the *St. Matthew Passion*—one soprano (the soprano concertist) was responsible for the soprano line, singing all the recitatives and arias in that range. Similarly, alto, tenor, and bass concertists handled the music in their ranges. But each of these singers was also responsible for his lines in ensemble pieces that called for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass singing together. This kind of piece, which typically involves most or all of the instruments as well, was most often found at the beginning and end of a church cantata or similar work. The eighteenth-century name for a movement like this was a "chorus." In this sense a chorus is a kind of movement calling for all the voices together. It's a chorus even if it is sung just by these four singers—it does not require a big ensemble of the kind we often associate with the word. A piece of concerted vocal music could be (and, it seems, often was) sung just by four principal singers, the concertists, performing solo numbers on their

own and functioning as a group in choruses.

But performances were not restricted to four singers. The director could choose to add more singers in a particular way. Optional additional singers, known as “ripienists,” represent the second kind of singer recognized in the eighteenth century. Once again the instrumental concerto provides an analogy: “ripienist” is the word used to describe additional players in an instrumental concerto—additional, that is, to the player of the solo or concertante part. In a vocal concerto these optional ripieno singers had no musical numbers of their own, but joined the concertists as reinforcements in appropriate numbers, typically “choruses.” In a church cantata by Bach, for example, ripienists might sing the choruses and chorales—and only those movements—leaving arias and recitatives to the concertists. Concertists sang everything and ripienists, who had no music of their own, simply doubled the concertists when told to do so.

In Bach’s *St. John Passion*, for example, this is reflected in the vocal parts from which Bach’s singers performed, which survive. They consist of four parts for concertists (Soprano, Alto, Tenor Evangelist, and Bass Jesus) and four for ripienists (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass). The concertists’ parts contain essentially all the music of the work (less a few small characters’ music placed in other parts), including recitatives and choruses of the Gospel narrative, chorales, and poetic arias and choruses. The four ripienists’ parts predictably contain only the choruses and chorales, in which they double the concertists. Unfortunately we have no time here to examine the construction of these original parts, which strongly suggests that each was designed to be used by one singer. Clearly, though, the two kinds of parts line up exactly with the eighteenth-century understanding of two kinds of singers.

All this adds up to a view of forces very different from the modern one. The eighteenth-century “chorus” was simply the sum of available singers, even if that amounted to only the principal singer of each line. The two categories of singers were not soloists and chorus members each responsible for different music, but principal singers (concertists) responsible for everything, and optional additional singers (ripienists) who might reinforce them. Concertists had to be more skilled—they sang solo arias as well as choruses—but they did not sit with their hands folded smiling beatifically during choruses because they were the principal singers of those movements, and sometimes the only ones.

Modern performances that use distinct soloists and a large chorus give a different view of a Bach passion setting. Of course there is the sheer volume produced by the larger vocal forces, and a typically larger instrumental ensemble used to match it. The larger forces have the potential to create an aura of monumentality, and often suggest a powerful and athletic kind of singing.

Subtler differences exist as well, however. These are illustrated by the framing choral movements of the *St. Matthew Passion*, “Kommt, ihr Töchter” and “Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder.” In a modern performance these are typically “choral” movements sung by the large ensemble. In this sense they appear to be related to the Gospel choruses and chorale settings also sung by the large group. The texts of these movements are poetic, however, and their metrically-regular musical settings reveal them to be ensemble arias. In Bach’s time, in fact, they were called “arie tutti.” They are thus actually more closely related textually and musically to the solo arias and duets in the work, and function like them. The connection is clear when they are sung by the same singers who perform the arias, but masked when singers are divided along modern lines. They are different movements when sung by the chorus rather than by concertists

supported by ripieno singers, with potentially different meanings.

Dramatic Roles

One consequence of staffing the vocal lines of a passion in the way Bach did is that the principal singers served several different functions, presenting poetic and hymnic commentary (arias and chorales), narrative in recitative (especially the tenor who sang the Evangelist's words and the bass who sang Jesus') and the portions of the narrative sung by the vocal ensemble together (choruses of groups in the passion narrative). This meant, for example, that in one stretch of the *St. Matthew Passion* the bass concertist sang Jesus' last words ("Eli, Eli lama asabthani"), participated in the Gospel chorus "Der rufet dem Elias," sang the chorale "Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden" just after the moment of Jesus' death, participated in the Gospel chorus "Wahrlich, dieser ist Gottes Sohn gewesen," then delivered the reflective recitative and aria "Am Abend, da es kühle war" and "Mache dich, mein Herze, rein."

The modern listener often has trouble imagining how it was possible for one singer to present the words both of the central character and his accusers, and to offer commentary on the story as well. This is especially problematic if we think of the bass singer as portraying Jesus as a character—that is, according to an operatic model.

The paradox is, of course, that from a structural and stylistic point of view, the text and music of an oratorio passion did borrow from opera. The solo commentary movements draw on operatic models, both in their organization (pairs of free and lyric poems set as orchestrally-accompanied recitative and as arias) and also in borrowed musical styles (such as the rage aria type clearly audible, for example, in "Gebt mir meinen Jesum wieder").

But this borrowing from opera does not significantly affect the Gospel narrative portion, at least not in this kind of passion setting. The multiple duties of singers strongly suggest that the "roles" of Evangelist and Jesus were not operatically representational and that Bach was not attempting dramatic realism in his setting of the passion story. The principal tenor and bass in a Bach passion performance were simply responsible for the delivery of the narrative and commentary, not for the realistic portrayal of individuals. That some of the words they sing are direct speech makes those words immediate and evocative but does not mean that the conventions of dramatic realism apply. Bach's singers stepped in and out of various roles, and we need to accept that there was understood to be no conflict among them. This is a real contrast to modern performances that divide up the music along dramatic lines, especially those in which a resonant-voiced bass sings nothing but Jesus' words, leaving the words of groups to members of the chorus, and the bass arias to another soloist.

Once again there are consequences for the listener. This kind of performance emphasizes the dramatic presentation of the story, and arguably invites listeners to react directly to the characters as they might in a play or opera. The poetic texts and carefully selected chorale stanzas that serve as commentary were designed to bring out particular themes, and to lead listeners down specific interpretive paths as they contemplated the story. A dramatic presentation of the piece arguably distracts the listener from the interpretive messages the librettist and composer chose to emphasize, replacing meditation on the texts' themes with a more direct response to the characters in the story. Once again, the meaning of the work changes with its execution.

The Double Chorus

The one thing everybody knows about the *St. Matthew Passion* is that it is a double-chorus composition, and this scoring is widely considered its most characteristic musical feature. The idea that the work balances two matched ensembles against each other—a feature typically regarded as “symmetry”—has itself been a theme of almost every discussion. The view of the *St. Matthew Passion* as a symmetrical double-chorus work has arisen largely from the experience of modern performances that use distinct soloists and two large choirs. Seen from a distance, the two ensembles, each visually dominated by a large number of singers, do indeed look equal.

But in light of what we know about the forces Bach used in his own performances, we need to ask ourselves what it really means to call this work a double-chorus composition. It turns out that it owes a great deal to ordinary single-chorus technique, and thus is closely related to typical passion repertory. This aspect of the work is much harder to recognize in most modern performances.

The best way to understand the work’s construction is to consider a famous movement from Bach’s *St. John Passion*, the aria “Mein teurer Heiland.” It combines a solo bass singing an aria with the ripieno group, which overlays a hymn harmonized in four parts. There are two points here. First, this scoring gives the ripieno group something slightly independent to do: they sing a four-part chorale essentially on their own. (Actually only the bass is entirely on his own—the concertists double the other three lines.) Second, this movement requires the presence of the ripieno ensemble because there are two vocal bass lines in this piece, one for the aria and one in the chorale. Bach’s scoring creates the slightly contradictory case of an essential ripieno group. This is an exceptional use of vocal forces that Bach specified because the text of this movement is a dialogue, realized as a musical conversation between the bass soloist and the ripieno ensemble.

It appears that this very aspect of the *St. John Passion* was an inspiration for Bach, and for Christian Friedrich Henrici, the librettist of the *St. Matthew Passion*, in creating that work. Each of its most important commentary movements is cast as an allegorical dialogue between the Daughter of Zion and the Believers. The aria with chorale from the *St. John Passion* just mentioned is, in fact, a dialogue between those same two allegorical characters; this is specified in the source from which Bach and his librettist borrowed the text. That movement evidently served as a model for the many dialogues in the new piece, and I am convinced that they represent Bach’s starting point for his design of the work overall.

Bach handled the dialogue texts in the *St. Matthew Passion* by providing the work with two complete SATB vocal ensembles, expanding on the principle he used in the aria from the *St. John Passion*. In setting many of the *St. Matthew Passion* texts, Bach has one side of the dialogue sung by a soloist from one group (Chorus 1) and the other side sung by the entire four-part ensemble of the other group (Chorus 2). In a few pieces (including the opening and closing numbers) Bach uses all four voices of Chorus 1 and answers them with the four voices of Chorus 2.

This organization is intimately connected with the conception of vocal forces discussed earlier. In the original parts for this work, which also survive, we find four principal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor Evangelist, and Bass Jesus, all in Chorus 1) containing essentially all the Gospel narrative in addition to arias and chorales. These are, in essence, the concertists’ parts, just as in the *St. John*

Passion—in fact they are disposed exactly as in that work. There are also four additional vocal parts (Chorus 2) whose singers double all the chorales and many of the choruses, most of which proceed with the voices in each range in unison. This, too, is just like the *St. John Passion*—these are effectively ripienists' parts.

This is what a performance along the lines of Bach's, with its particular vocal forces, lets you hear: that Chorus 2 is fundamentally a ripieno group, acting most of the time in support of Chorus 1, which is the concertists' group. You can hear this by noticing, as I mentioned, that essentially all the Gospel narrative is in Chorus 1. You can also note that in almost every dialogue movement Chorus 1 takes the lead and Chorus 2 follows: typically, Chorus 1 makes the opening textual and musical statement, whereas Chorus 2 merely provides commentary.

A good example is the accompanied recitative and aria "O Schmerz" and "Ich will bei meinen Jesum wachen" in Part 1 of the *Passion*. In the recitative the tenor of Chorus 1 sings the poetic text; he is answered by a beautiful but subordinate four-part chorale in Chorus 2. In the following aria, the tenor of Chorus 1 sings the solo aria line, answered by occasional interjections from Chorus 2, which presents important but less prominent material as a group. In a performance with Bach-sized forces one can hear the secondary role of Chorus 2 compared to Chorus 1, and understand this inequality as the difference between a concertists' group and a ripieno ensemble. This is much more difficult to perceive in a performance with larger forces; in this recitative and aria, for example, to hear Chorus 2 as subordinate when its members greatly outnumber those in Chorus 1 is difficult.

Chorus 2 is subordinate throughout the work in other ways. For example, Chorus 1 sings almost all the Gospel narrative; only a few passages are in Chorus 2. When Bach uses only one ensemble for a Gospel chorus, that group is most often Chorus 1; Chorus 2 gets only two such pieces. In several of the longest and most important Gospel choruses the two vocal groups begin antiphonally, but after a few measures they combine, and the texture collapses into four-part writing. The effect, with Chorus 2 doubling Chorus 1, amounts to traditional ripieno practice.

There are a handful of true antiphonal Gospel choruses but they are few and extremely short—just a few measures each. Overall, there is very little symmetrical double-chorus writing in the whole work. From this point of view, one could say that the *St. Matthew Passion* isn't a double-chorus piece at all, at least not a symmetrical one, because real double-chorus scoring plays such a small role, and because the two choruses' roles are so lopsided. In a performance with large forces, the sheer volume of the combined voices and instruments tends to over-emphasize the few pieces that do use the two vocal ensembles equally.

But there is another dimension as well. In this work Bach has given his ripieno singers—Chorus 2, in my analysis—more to do than we would expect from vocalists of this type. In fact they have a lot more responsibility. Probably inspired by the dialogue texts and the subordinate but somewhat independent role Chorus 2 plays in their musical settings, Bach found additional things for his "liberated" ripieno group to do. You can see this immediately in the original vocal parts for Chorus 2, which include not just choruses and chorales but—amazingly—solo arias as well.

Dividing the usual concertists' duties among two sets of vocalists, Bach assigned solo arias to his secondary singers, the ones in Chorus 2. Some of the arias in the *St. Matthew Passion* are performed by the singers and instrumentalists of Chorus 1, as you would expect from their

concertist status, but other arias come from Chorus 2. From this point of view, the four singers in Chorus 2 are not really ripienists but four additional concertists, just like those in Chorus 1. In their solo arias, the voices of Chorus 2 move out of their subordinate role into the spotlight usually reserved for principal singers.

Many modern performances obscure this essential feature of the *St. Matthew Passion* because they use only one soloist to sing all the arias in a given vocal range, backed sometimes by the instruments of Chorus 1 and other times by those of Chorus 2. This is in contrast to a performance with the labor divided as Bach partitioned it, in which arias are presented from each side. The modern disposition gives the impression that the double-chorus aspects of the work, such as they are, reside in the choral ensembles and in the instrumental groups. In fact, the division of forces starts with the principal singers.

A performance with two sets of singers also lets us hear that Chorus 2's status is secondary because Bach's assignment of arias is hardly equal. Once again Chorus 1 takes priority. Each of the voices of Chorus 1 other than the tenor (who sings the Evangelist's words) has more arias than its Chorus 2 counterpart. Overall, in fact, Chorus 1 has twice as many arias, and its arias also make much greater vocal demands. For example, Tenor 2 sings "Geduld" with basso continuo only, and its companion recitative "Mein Jesus schweigt" with its transparent accompaniment. Tenor 1 has to contend with a solo oboe, strings, and with the second-chorus forces both in the recitative "O Schmerz" and in the aria "Ich will bei meinen Jesu wachen." The lone aria for Soprano 2, "Blute nur," hardly compares in difficulty to "Ich will dir mein Herze schenken" and "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben" required of Soprano 1. In a typical modern performance, with the arias in each range all sung by the same person, this distinction disappears.

As Bach revised the *St. Matthew Passion* over the years, he made changes that strengthened the work's double-chorus features. Perhaps the most important was the provision of two distinct basso continuo groups, one for each chorus. Originally, the two ensembles had been served by one continuo group, just as a typical single-chorus passion would have been. The new scoring made each of the choirs musically more complete and potentially independent, and strengthened the impression—or the illusion—that this is a double-chorus work. In this regard, a typical performance by balanced forces takes the work a step further in a direction mapped out by Bach himself.

But it still represents something modern. We inevitably do this in performing old works, creating new versions or even (in some sense) making new compositions of them. The *St. Matthew Passion* presents an especially striking example, because even the way we staff the vocal lines in a performance has so many effects: on the nature of the chorus and on the role and duties of the soloists; on the prominence or even the very presence of a dramatic element; and on the work's fundamental disposition as a double-chorus composition. The meaning of a musical work clearly does not reside in the score alone, but depends greatly on how it is performed. This is worth remembering, if only now and then.

ENDNOTE

The material in this essay is drawn from Daniel R. Melamed, *Hearing Bach's Passions* (New York:

Oxford University Press, 2005), which includes suggestions for further reading and listening. The recording of the *St. Matthew Passion* conducted by Paul McCreesh (Archiv 474 200-2) deploys forces almost exactly as documented in Bach's performing materials and discussed here.

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