

BACH: ST. MATTHEW PASSION, BWV 244

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: Born in Eisenach, March 21, 1685; died in Leipzig, July 28, 1750

Of all mankind's great testimonials to religious faith and devotion, one of the supreme musical manifestations is surely Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Written in 1729 (or possibly 1727 - scholars still argue the point) and first performed at the Vespers service on Good Friday of that year (April 15), it stands at the summit not only of Bach's own enormous output, but also of a thousand years of Western music. Ray Minshull, in his annotation for a London/Decca recording some years ago, wrote this eloquent summary of what the *St. Matthew Passion* means to us: "A work of such true, sincere and sustained greatness naturally begins by earning our respect, but its completeness as an act of worship and faith gives it a spiritual and emotional content which is an inexhaustible source of joy and affection. Great secular music occasionally touches the same chords, but cannot by its nature achieve that additional dimension of pure and intense faith which shines through the whole of Bach's greatest composition."

Musical dramatizations of the Passion story date back to at least the thirteenth century, the period of the Miracle Plays. The subsequent development of this genre passed through phases involving varying degrees of departure from biblical and liturgical texts and varying degrees of dramatization. Strictly plainsong or chordal settings gradually gave way to polyphonic treatments of at least part of the text, and some of the trappings of Italian opera were also introduced, in particular the orchestra and the use of recitative and aria.

Mention should be made of German musical settings just prior to Bach's attention to Passion music. Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672), Bach's great predecessor in German sacred music, had confined his Passion texts to the Gospel, but subsequent composers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries expanded the scope of their Passions to include extended passages of lyrical, non-biblical text. Innovation turned to excess, and for a time there was little difference between a Passion-oratorio and an opera save in subject matter. Eventually there was a strong reaction to the frankly sensational treatments, but non-biblical texts were still incorporated. Hence, when Bach turned his attention to the Passion story - with its choruses, arias of non-biblical text, chorales, explicit text painting in the orchestra, and dramatic representations of the Evangelist, Jesus, the crowd and smaller parts - he was not indulging in anything historically innovative. There were, however, two extremely important respects in which the *St. Matthew Passion* transcended all precedents. These were its length (well over three hours) and its aura of monumentality.

The composition of Bach's first Passion setting, the *St. John Passion*, coincided with his move in 1723 from the instrumental, secular-oriented position in the service of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen to the post of Cantor at St. Thomas' School in Leipzig, where the compositional requirements demanded mostly choral music on sacred subjects. By long-standing tradition, Passion music was provided in Leipzig's two largest churches, St. Thomas' and St. Nicolas', on alternate Good Fridays. Responsibility for providing this music fell to the Cantor. In 1725 Bach again set the Passion, employing as his librettist the prominent Leipziger Christian Friedrich Henrici, a postal employee by vocation and a poet by avocation writing under the pen name of Picander. This so-called "Picander" Passion has been lost. For his next Passion, the *St. Matthew*, Bach turned again to Henrici for texts. There was also a *St. Mark Passion* of 1731, mostly a conflation of previously existing material; this too is lost.

The *St. Matthew Passion* is laid out on a huge scale, in two parts comprising about seventy numbers: choruses, chorales, arias, ariosos and recitatives. The forces required include two four-part choirs, a boys' choir, two orchestras (usually combined today) each consisting of two flutes, two oboes, bassoon, strings and organ. A viola da gamba and two recorders are also required. Generally, Orchestra I plays with Choir I and Orchestra II with Choir II. Choir I represents the twelve disciples, Choir II the people at large, though for the opening and closing numbers of the Passion they join to represent the entire Christian Church. The choirs also merge for the chorales and the closing of Part I.

Four vocal soloists are required for the arias (soprano, contralto, tenor, bass), and two more carry the roles of the Evangelist (tenor) and Jesus (bass). These latter two sing only in recitative, but a recitative more often akin to arioso than to the dry recitative of opera. The Evangelist is an objective narrator who relates the events of the Passion story, which covers the period from the Last Supper to the Entombment. His recitative is accompanied by the organ, but Jesus is always accompanied by the strings, which provide a halo-like effect around his words (another element borrowed from Italian opera). The sole exception occurs at Jesus' final words, just before death, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani"? There are also eleven *Soliloquenten*, bit parts sung by individual members of the chorus for miscellaneous characters such as Pilate, Judas, Peter, priests, maids, witnesses, etc.

In addition to the Gospel texts, which are drawn from Matthew Chapters 26 and 27 complete (in itself a substantial piece of writing; it takes about twenty minutes to read aloud), there are 28 interpolated pieces set to texts by Henrici. These include twelve solo arias encompassing a great variety of moods and expression, accompanied by the orchestra and often featuring a solo instrument; ten ariosos (orchestrally accompanied sung narratives but not full-fledged arias); two arias with choir; one duet with choir; and three choruses.

Twelve chorales (in addition to those used in the big choral numbers) taken from contemporary German Protestant hymnbooks complete the textual component. All are set to four-part harmony with the melody in the soprano, and serve to portray the tension, feelings and responses of the congregation as a collective body to various events in the Passion story as they unfold. Some of the melodies are used for two or more hymns; one of them is heard five times, and has acquired the sobriquet "the St. Matthew Chorale." It is not unreasonable to imagine members of Bach's congregation singing along with the choristers, since these hymns were as well known in eighteenth-century Germany as popular songs are today.

A performance of the complete, uncut *St. Matthew Passion* takes more than three hours, plus intermission. That's something of an endurance test of any audience. But imagine yourself back in Leipzig on Good Friday in 1729, where Bach's music was but a part of the Vespers service. The service began about 1:30 in the afternoon with a hymn. Then came Part I of Bach's Passion, then another hymn, then the sermon (which may have lasted up to an hour), another hymn, Part II of the Passion, a motet, the Good Friday Collect, still another hymn, and finally the Blessing. A truly devout and diligent churchgoer might also have sat through a long morning service as well.

To prepare us for the Passion experience, Bach wrote one of the most majestic, powerfully moving and structurally complex choruses in the history of music. This and the chorus at the other end of the *St. Matthew Passion* are the mighty pillars that support the immense musical structure. For the opening chorus Bach employs all the resources at his disposal. The aura of deep solemnity is set in the introductory bars for orchestra (Orchestras I and II combined), where the complex interweaving of melodic strands creates a dense and continuously evolving contrapuntal web. The choral entry in bar eighteen - that anguished, fervent expression of communal grief - is given only to Chorus I. The reason Bach withholds Chorus II soon becomes apparent, for he pits it against Chorus I in a dramatic dialogue of question and answer: "See Him!" "Who?" "The Bridegroom" "How?" "So like a Lamb is He," and so on. To Albert Schweitzer, this chorus portrays a vivid theatrical event, with crowds "surging through the streets, moving about excitedly." Soaring above all this earthly commotion and suffering a separate chorus (either sopranos or a boys' choir), in a different key and to a different rhythm, intones the chorale "O guiltless Lamb of God" with its promise of redemption. The interaction of these three levels - the heavenly choir, the two earthly choirs, and the orchestra supporting the whole vocal edifice - produces an unparalleled richness of sound and an image of impregnable faith.

Following this chorus, Bach unfolds a steady succession of numbers suffused with sublime beauty, deeply-felt intimacy or dramatic excitement. With extraordinary vividness, he gives expression to all the sorrow, pain, terror and wonder of this great Christian drama. The characters are no mere abstractions; they are richly imbued with human, lifelike qualities, characters who interact freely and spontaneously, who portray their deepest thoughts and emotions. As such, the *St. Matthew Passion* remains one of the most exalted, yet most accessible, monuments of Man's devotional expression.

An account of all the notable moments in the *St. Matthew Passion* would fill many pages. Here are just a few of the dozens, perhaps hundreds, that the listener might look forward to:

The first recitative ("Du lieber Heiland du") for the contralto, who, incidentally, gets the lion's share of the solo numbers, is accompanied throughout by flutes playing an expressive "teardrop" motif.

Flutes also express the time-honored device of musical sighs of grief in the first soprano aria ("Blute nur"). Later in this aria, at the word "Schlange" (snake), both the soprano and the accompanying bass wind their way through serpentine musical lines.

Underscoring the text of the tenor aria "Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen" (I will watch with my Jesus), Bach incorporates as its principal melodic material a traditional watchman's call.

The thunder of the chorus "Sind Blitze, sind Donner" is vividly portrayed by the virtually non-stop rumbling of the bass line.

When Pilate asks the crowd which of the prisoners he should release, Jesus or Barabbas, he expects and hopes for the former. The unexpectedness (to Pilate) and horror (for us) of the crowd's call for "Barabbas" is transmitted through a wrenching harmonic gearshift that totally defies the expected resolution of the previous chord. The events leading to the Crucifixion now unfold rapidly. The scourging of Jesus is heard in the whiplash effects in the orchestrally accompanied recitative "Erbarme es Gott! Hier steht der Heiland angebunden," and the weight of the Cross Jesus bears to Golgotha in the bass aria "Komm, süßes Kreuz," is painfully portrayed in the "dragging" of the lower strings.

After Jesus expires on the Cross, the veil of the temple is rent in two, the earth shakes, and the graves open, all to graphically descriptive effects in the orchestra and nearly hysterical recitative from the Evangelist. Then, in one of the most wondrous passages in the whole *St. Matthew Passion*, the chorus exclaims that "this truly was the Son of God." It is a brief moment, but one of sublime beauty and absolutely unforgettable.

And then that final chorus! Flowing alternately between the stern monumentality of C minor and the consoling warmth of E-flat major, all humanity bids the Savior a loving farewell, bringing to an end both an incomparable musical masterpiece and a timeless, communal act of faith.