PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Johann Sebastian Bach – *Saint John Passion*

Born March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Thuringia, Germany.
Died July 28, 1750, Leipzig, Germany.

Saint John Passion

Bach composed the *Saint John Passion* in 1724 and led the first performance on Good Friday, April 7, of that year, in Saint Nicholas Church in Leipzig. He revised the score on three occasions: in 1725, sometime around 1730, and in 1749. The score calls for four-part chorus, vocal soloists (for arias and dramatic roles), an instrumental ensemble of two flutes, two oboes, two oboes d'amore and oboes da caccia, two violas d'amore, viola da gamba, strings; and a continuo consisting of organ, harpsichord, bassoon, cello, and bass. Performance time is approximately forty-two minutes for part 1 and ninety-two minutes for part 2.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of music from Bach's *Saint John Passion* were given at Orchestra Hall on April 10 and 11, 1952, when soprano Uta Graf performed "Ich folge dir gleichfalls" from part 1 and "Zerfliesse, mein Herze" from part 2, with Rafael Kubelík conducting. Our first subscription concert performances of the complete Passion were given on April 7, 8, and 9, 1966, with Judith Raskin, Maureen Forrester, Ernst Haefliger, John Boyden, and Kenneth Smith as soloists; the Chicago Symphony Chorus, Margaret Hillis, director; and Jean Martinon conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on June 7, 8, 9, and 10, 2001, with Camilla Nylund, Annette Markert, Marcus Ullmann, Jörg Hempel, and Stephan Loges as soloists; the Chicago Symphony Chorus, Duain Wolfe, director; and Peter Schreier singing the role of the Evangelist and conducting.

This is the first of Bach's two great Passion settings. Although the later *Saint Matthew* is better known today, the *Saint John Passion* is in many ways the more audacious and original, if less perfect work. With this score, Bach first tested the full range of his expressive potential—as composer and as dramatist—on the largest scale. He composed it during his first year as cantor of Leipzig's four main Lutheran churches, and it was performed on his first Good Friday in the new job he would hold until his death twenty-six years later. Bach no doubt went out of his way to prove himself, for he had been far from first choice for the Leipzig job. (Georg Philipp Telemann, the front runner, declined the offer after tough negotiations; when Bach eventually was picked, after offers to several other composers fell through, a member of the municipal council complained that, in lieu of the best man, they would have to make do with a mediocrity).

The obituary of J.S. Bach that was written by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel (with the help of Johann Friedrich Agricola, one of Bach's pupils) mentions five Passion settings. Two are lost, and only the text for another, the *Saint Mark Passion,* survives. That leaves just the Passions according to Saint John and Saint Matthew to demonstrate what Bach could accomplish on the grand scale in depicting the last days in the life of Jesus. The two—as different in structure and detail as the scriptures they set—are among his greatest achievements.

By Bach's time, Passion settings traditionally supplemented the biblical narration with newly composed poetic texts and called for diverse musical forms, from recitative to familiar chorales for the congregation to sing. It was left to Bach to add arias of an almost operatic splendor, as well as opening and closing choruses, and to exploit the full dramatic potential of the form. In his hands, the story has a potent, three-dimensional immediacy that still seems very modern—we hear not only from the characters in the drama, but from anonymous bystanders, commenting on the action in elaborate, reflective arias, and from the members of the congregation itself, in the chorale tunes they knew by heart, here presented in rich and supple harmonies. This combination of action and commentary—with choral singing and virtuoso solos interrupting the unfolding narrative—gives the score unusual musical variety and a complex, highly theatrical pacing. The shifting points of view, from the principal players to onsite reporters, is almost cinematic in its cross-cutting between different perspectives.

The dimensions of the *Saint John Passion* exceeded anything Bach had written before, including the *Magnificat* he composed for his first Christmas in Leipzig. When Bach began the Passion, he wasn't aware that in Leipzig Good Friday services alternated yearly between two churches, and so he wrote the work for Saint Thomas's, the largest church in

town. Just four days before the performance, when Bach was told that he would have to move to Saint Nicholas's, he was worried that there wouldn't be room for all of his performers. (He also complained that the harpsichord there needed repair.) He insisted that extra space be made in the choir loft, and he made sure the church could accommodate the expanded instrumental ensemble he wanted, which included an unusually large string section, a continuo accompaniment with both harpsichord and organ, and several special effects, including viola da gamba, and two violas d'amore. (The viola da gamba, a forerunner of the bass viol, and the viola d'amore, a variant of the viola popular during Bach's time, both have prominent obbligato solos in arias.)

Bach designed the *Saint John Passion* in two large parts, divided by the Good Friday sermon. Chapters 18 and 19 of the Gospel according to Saint John (in Martin Luther's German translation) gave Bach his overall structure. Following tradition, Bach lets the major characters in the drama tell their own story—principally Jesus, Peter, Pilate, and the narrating Evangelist. Theirs is the music of action—plain, sparsely accompanied recitative that lets the words move forward at the speed of speech, never detained by musical detail.

The remainder of the Passion is musical commentary—the members of the congregation reacting to the central events in the story through the singing of hymns, and various individuals expressing their innermost thoughts. The simple hymns (or chorales, as they are often called) represent the voice of the people—the familiar music of a community united by a local story of universal significance. The real musical showpieces in the Passion are the accompanied recitatives, arias, and choruses that Bach inserted into the narrative flow—settings of poems by now long-forgotten writers B. H. Brockes, Christian Weise, and Christian Heinrich Postel. It is here, in these isolated moments of reflection, where Bach the musician—the single greatest composer of his time, as Leipzig officials would eventually recognize—gives his imagination free reign.

Part 1, which is little more than a third of the score, takes us through Peter's betrayal of Jesus. It begins with a magnificent and imposing chorus that is both introduction and hymn of praise. This first part includes three commenting arias—one for mezzo-soprano with interwoven oboe lines; a "duet" for soprano and the two flutes, playing in unison; and a dramatic tenor solo accompanied by all the instruments.

The design of part 2 is more complex. It begins with a simple hymn—it will return near the end—and then moves directly into the powerful central scene of the Passion, the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate. Bach designed this sequence of numbers in an elaborate symmetrical pattern, centering on the chorale “Durch dein Gefängnis, Gottes Sohn” (no. 22, Our freedom, Son of God) and framing it with alternating arias and crowd scenes, where the dramatic characters and the chorus exchange lines with realistic, rapid-fire urgency.

The moment of Jesus’s death on the cross is handled simply and unforgettably. Jesus’s last words, “Es ist vollbracht!” (Now it is finished!) are set to a plain descending scale (at the end of the recitative, no. 29), that is then echoed by a solo viola da gamba, which begins a long, rhapsodic melody. This launches an extended song of meditation (no. 30, for mezzo-soprano) that is one of Bach’s most unconventional and expressive arias. It is violently interrupted midway by the image of “the hero from Judah” and then drifts off, ending with the voice alone, repeating Jesus’s final words one last time. The orchestra does not even return, as tradition dictates, to round off the aria; there is nothing but silence. In a score filled with complex music and rich, pictorial details, like the description of Peter’s anguished crying (in the recitative, no. 12) or the earthquake that will soon follow (the tenor arioso, no. 34), nothing is more moving than the understatement of this moment.

At the very end, Bach writes a wondrous, comforting lullaby for chorus, “Ruht wohl, ihr heilegen Gebeine” (Rest well, beloved, sweetly sleeping), and then, to conclude, not a large and impressive number, but a four-part setting of another hymn. (For many years, Bach felt something grander was needed here at the end, and he sometimes substituted an elaborate chorale setting, but he eventually saw that the simplicity and directness of a favorite hymn was exactly right.)

The year after the first performance of the *Saint John Passion,* Bach led the work again on Good Friday, this time with several new numbers. Even after he composed the monumental *Saint Matthew Passion* that is sometimes called his greatest single work, he continued to return to *Saint John,* making further adjustments, cutting and pruning as well as writing new music altogether. In 1749, the last year of his life, he made a final version of the score, essentially restoring it to its original shape, although with augmented performing forces. A quarter of a century after Bach wrote the *Saint John Passion* for his first Good Friday in Leipzig, this magnificent score still held a special place in his heart.

A postscript on religion and art. In recent years, Bach's *Saint John Passion* has sometimes been criticized for its implied hostility toward Jews. The controversy derives not from Bach's own viewpoint, but from the texts he excerpted from the Gospel of John in the translation by Martin Luther, whose anti-Jewish writings are well known (they have been officially repudiated by the Lutheran church). For a fuller understanding of Bach's theological stance, the portrayal of the Jews in the first-century Gospel of John, and the historical context for the anti-Jewish sentiments of Bach's time, Michael Marissen's *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's "St. John Passion"* is very helpful. As Marissen points out, Bach himself did not single out Judaism, but felt "that all humans (except Jesus), tainted by original sin, are guilty and in need of redemption."

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