

When Bach arrived in Leipzig in 1723 as the newly appointed Cantor of St. Thomas's Church, his mandate to produce concerted music (meaning with both voices and instruments) for Sunday services and most major holidays was clear. There was an important ambiguity, however, surrounding what was expected for Good Friday. In the preceding six weeks of Lent, only vocal music was permitted, in what was called a *tempus clausum*, excepting only the Feast of the Annunciation. For Good Friday services, Leipzig had long followed Martin Luther's dictum that the "Passion of Christ should not be acted out in words and pretense," and presented a sober (and 140 year-old) polyphonic setting of the Passion drawn from the Gospel of John by Johann Walter, Luther's close associate.

In less conservative places, instrumental accompaniment had been added to Passion *historias* through much of the seventeenth century, and by the turn of the eighteenth century, a new genre had emerged: the Passion oratorio, in which arias and recitatives, the standard forms of opera, alternated with choral settings of the Gospel narratives. Contemporary texts, often allegorical in nature, intermingled with the words of the Gospel to provide a contemplative and didactic perspective on the crucifixion, and to supply the metrical and rhyming poetic text most suitable for an aria.

In 1717, this tradition found its way to Leipzig in the progressive New Church. Bach's predecessor at St. Thomas, Johann Kuhnau, pushed for permission to do the same, noting that the New Church was drawing large crowds on Good Friday. He finally succeeded in 1721, when his *St. Mark Passion* was presented in the Good Friday vespers service.

Despite the concessions made by the Leipzig consistory, Bach still faced significant restrictions. The Passion was to be divided in half, so that a sermon could be given in the middle. The second part was to be immediately followed by Jacob Handl's motet "Ecce quomodo moritur justus." Most significantly, the words of the Gospel could not be altered. This ruled out the use of the famous Passion libretto by B.H. Brockes, a poetic paraphrase of the Biblical narrative; Bach was acquainted with settings of the "Brockes Passion" by several composers, including Handel, Telemann, and Keiser. Newly arrived in Leipzig, Bach had no time to find a collaborator to develop a libretto for Good Friday 1724. He assembled pious texts from at least three poets (Brockes, Christian Weise, and Christian Heinrich Postel), and presented chapters 18 and 19 of the Gospel according to John, interpolating two brief extracts from Matthew (26:75 and 27:51-52) which provide particularly poignant drama. The Biblical words are sung by the Evangelist, singing the narrative text from John, and by various soloists taking on the personae of Jesus, Peter, Pilate, and others. The whole body of singers except for the Evangelist (in Bach's day the soloists formed the chorus) sang the "turbae" or crowd scenes.

One can only imagine the impact that the congregation must have felt on Good Friday, 1724, when the *St. John Passion* was performed for the first time. While formally close to Kuhnau's model, Bach's setting depicts the events of the Crucifixion with an almost savage directness which could hardly be more different from Kuhnau's relatively placid version (judging from the incomplete surviving remnants of the Kuhnau). By this time, Bach's reputation for providing difficult and even, so it was said, *ugly* music for worship was well known in Leipzig. Prior to the *St. John*, though, such music was in the service of getting across a relatively abstract point of theology - glossing the Gospel of an ordinary week. And for all its ambition, most of Bach's first Leipzig Passion is not particularly difficult for the listener to comprehend.

It is perhaps the closest thing Bach gave us to an opera, a rawly emotional and often brutal telling of the Passion which highlights the violence and sorrow of the events.

This brutality has given rise to a longstanding critique. John's depiction of Jews is quite negative; he has them scream, "Away, away, crucify him!" Bach's music for this moment and like ones is full of sound and fury, and has occasioned difficult conversations since at least the 1990s, when there were picket lines at some performances of the *St. John Passion*. Scholarly opinion about the justice of charging Bach with anti-Judaism is mixed. Richard Taruskin has gone so far as to propose alternative words for two moments in the libretto. Michael Marissen, on the other hand, by no means an apologist for anti-Judaism (he is best known for arguing that the "Hallelujah Chorus" in Handel's *Messiah* is a celebration of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem), has argued that while Bach set John's words with force suitable to their intention, his own opinions are best gathered from the commentary that follows the Gospel text; after all, that is where Bach was at liberty to choose the text. Marissen writes: "Who, then, is held accountable for Jesus' crucifixion in Bach's *St. John Passion*? The commentary hymn following on Jesus' being struck by one of the attendants of "the Jews" expresses matters the most forcibly, its "I, I" referring to Bach's Lutheran congregants: "Who has struck you so? ... I, I and my sins, which are as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore; they have caused you the sorrow that strikes you and the grievous host of pain." Bach's *Passion*, in contrast to Handel's, takes the focus away from the perfidy of "the Jews" and onto the sins of Christian believers."