The sacred drama of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*

The tradition of singing the Passion of Jesus Christ — the story of his trial and crucifixion — is an old one. By the thirteenth century, a time when music notation was in early bloom and the composition of complex, multi-layered music could flower, liturgical dramas were already a common practice in the Easter and Christmas celebrations of churches across Europe. Reformation leaders championed the singing of the Passion during the Renaissance, and the high Baroque era saw the tradition find fertile ground among Lutherans in northern Germany. It was here that Johann Sebastian Bach, director of music at the church of St. Thomas in Leipzig, penned his own setting of the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1727.

Bach's Passion settings, of which only two survive, represent a synthesis of his œuvre. They are sacred music, yet their performance is as much concert as worship, and they are didactic and dramatic at the same time. To accomplish this synthesis in the *St. Matthew Passion*, Bach constructed its some five dozen movements out of three essential types of music. First, scenes of the Passion story play out as musical dialogue among named characters such as Jesus, Peter, and Pontius Pilate. Often, these scenes also include a crowd, such as the murderous mob or Jesus' disciples, portrayed by the choruses. Next, arias are often sung by commentators, whose words of lament, confusion, or fervor reflect the universal Christian's response to the story. In many of these scenes and arias, the two choruses and orchestras play off of each other, but in chorales — contemporary hymns arranged with Bach's own harmonic touch — all the performers come together to unify the music of the Biblical characters with that of listeners seventeen hundred years later.

Though it is not an opera, the *St. Matthew Passion* is an enduring example of the dramatic potential of liturgical music in Bach's day. Like drawing stops on an organ, Bach combines more sound for more impact — the grandest moments are the rising shouts of the crowd scenes, the unisons between the two orchestras (listen to the surges of unified power in the opening chorus), and, of course, the chorales. The length of every element, from single notes to entire movements, matters as well: an angry multitude lets loose flurries of fast notes, while a powerful universal statement such as the oratorio's final chorus takes its time. Occasionally, Bach highlights a particular event or moment with distinct color, and, like Rembrandt building an impasto, thereby makes it more three-dimensional, as if one could reach out and feel it. When Jesus speaks of the shepherd, listen for the sheep scattering up the hillside in the sound of the strings; following his death, listen for the earthquake in the furious thunder of the cello. A soprano aria in Part II dispenses with the basso continuo entirely (an extreme rarity in the Baroque period) to conjure a suspended, ethereal image of the purity of Christ and his salvation. The most notable such "painting" in the oratorio is a halo of warm string harmonies surrounding Jesus' singing itself, ever-present until he hangs on the cross. As he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", the glow vanishes for the first and the last time.

Woven among the brightest colors of the oratorio's drama, a subtler play unfolds in recitative. In the *St. Matthew Passion*, Bach uses recitative above all as the domain of the Evangelist, a narrator who describes the comings and goings of the characters and often introduces their dialogue. The role of the Evangelist is dramatically as well as vocally demanding, for as a bridge between listener and story, he projects an observer's reactions onto the tale. This calls for surprise, or anger, or fear, or whatever emotion befits the subsequent dialogue. Our careful rehearsal has been as much theatre as music, and the results of this dual aim serve the performance superbly. Recitative is the backbone of Baroque drama, but nowhere in the repertoire does it offer the scope of human emotion and communicative specificity as it does in Bach's role of the Evangelist.

The double-ensemble structure of the *St. Matthew Passion*, a characteristic that sets it aside from many oratorios of its time, allows for a heightened experience of the theology of the story of Christ. Grouped in with the first chorus are the Evangelist and most of the vocal soloists who play the characters of the Passion. The second chorus, whose soloists are mostly nameless, cannot intervene; no cries of "Leave him! Halt! Do not bind him!" can change the

fate of their Savior. Perhaps the most moving moment in this vein occurs when, following a useless plea ("Executioners, stop — are you not moved to pity?"), an alto sings, "If my tears can do nothing, take my heart, and let its blood flow as the sacrificial cup." Only in the penultimate movement does the second ensemble resign: "My Jesus, goodnight — my Jesus, goodnight." Recent scholarship, especially by Konrad Küster, has shown it likely that in St. Thomas, the second chorus sang from a small loft, the "swallow's nest," over ninety feet from the main choir gallery and from the main action. The second-group singers were therefore closest to the congregation — the only people in the building who, if the death of Jesus was inevitable, could continue his mission of salvation and grace.

The *St. Matthew Passion*, with a libretto by Bach's longtime collaborator Picander (Christian Friedrich Henrici), was first performed on Good Friday, April 11th, 1727. Bach subsequently mounted performances in 1729, 1736, and 1742, incorporating slight revisions. In the latter years of the eighteenth century, Bach's son Carl Phillip Emmanuel adopted choruses of the oratorio for use in his own pastiche settings. Famously revived in an 1829 performance by Felix Mendelssohn, the *St. Matthew Passion* gained popularity; by the early twentieth century, it had become the subject of significant focus by leading musical authorities of the day. Here we present it in a slightly abridged rendition, a contribution to a tradition of performance that has only gathered momentum since the work's premiere nearly three hundred years ago.

A confluence of drama and liturgy, a concert and a sacred service, a story at once immense and personal, Johann Sebastian Bach's setting of the *St. Matthew Passion* is a cornerstone of the Western artistic canon. To listeners of all backgrounds and faiths it offers a universal message of patience, forthrightness, and humility, and asks listeners to react and opine and to commit their hearts. We are pleased and proud to share our performance of Bach's masterpiece with you all, and hope you find in it an enriching human quality that you, in turn, can share with others.

Program notes by Bram Wayman