



The *St Matthew Passion's* Many Moving Parts

Program Essay by Chris Shepard • Artistic Director

Even for a composer whose catalog includes a number of large-scale, encyclopedic works—works like the *Clavier-Übung*, *Mass in B Minor*, *Christmas Oratorio*, *Brandenburg Concerti*—Bach's *St Matthew Passion* stands alone for sheer range of musical resources. Because of the annual hiatus from choral-orchestral music in the Leipzig church services during Lent, Bach had a generous five weeks to compose and rehearse an extended Passion setting for the Good Friday liturgy, as opposed to the usual grind of composing and rehearsing a new cantata each Sunday. And because of the Leipzig tradition of presenting the sung Passion at only one of the two principal churches each year, he had all of his choristers and instrumentalists to draw from for the Good Friday service. The result, most likely in 1727, was the nearly three-hour long *St Matthew Passion*, a work for two choirs (actually three, counting the separate choir that sang the chorale in the first movement), two orchestras, eight “aria soloists” and a range of “biblical soloists,” including the Evangelist and Jesus. Only the *Mass in B Minor* surpasses this stable of musicians, with its use of trumpets and timpani— instruments liturgically unavailable to Bach until Easter Sunday.

Not only does Bach have virtually unlimited musical resources at his disposal to tell the story of Jesus' crucifixion, he also uses these resources in breathtakingly varied combinations in order to reinforce the *Affekt* (the general emotion of a movement) and theological meaning of each solo movement. Here are three examples, out of the fifteen arias in the work: For the bass solo, *Gebt mir meinen Jesus nieder*, a commentary on Judas' remorse, when he throws his 30 silver pieces back at the Temple priests, Bach gives the first violin a florid solo, a musical flinging of the coins. In *Aus liebe will mein Heiland sterben*, a haunting, dream-like soprano meditation on Jesus' sacrificial love for us, Bach uses the sparse combination of solo flute with two oboes da caccia (modern English horns) to accompany the soprano. The basso continuo is silenced, making the oboes the *de facto* continuo, a technique called *bassetto*. The use of *bassetto* is quite rare in Bach's output, perhaps suggesting here the absence of God the Father, who ultimately turns his head away from Christ on the cross. Perhaps the most beloved solo in the *St Matthew Passion*, the bass aria *Mache dich, mein Herze, rein*, seems to harken back to the Christmas story in its use of rustic oboes da caccia and a gently rocking 12/8 *pastorale* meter. Bach will use the same elements in the second cantata of his *Christmas Oratorio* in 1734 as a lullaby for the infant Jesus. In using a soundscape that is associated with Christmas, Bach may be reminding the listener that the work begun with Jesus' incarnation is completed in his crucifixion. Further, he may be drawing the connection between the infant Jesus' swaddling clothes and the shroud in which the crucified Jesus will be buried.

But it is not only in the deployment of musical resources where we see Bach's nearly infinite sense of variety. The very structure of this mammoth work features the alternation of six different kinds of movements, each using a specific group of singers and players. It is this skeleton that enables Bach not only to tell the story of Jesus' crucifixion, but also to bring the listener into that story, represented sometimes by a soloist and sometimes by the choir. Bach does this to answer Luther's great imperative: not only that the Passion story be recounted each Good Friday, but also that the story be used to show the believers their own sinfulness, leading them to humble themselves at the foot of the Cross.

Bach uses these different types of movements in order to answer Luther's call:

Secco Recitatives. The framework of the *St Matthew Passion* is determined first and foremost by the biblical story itself, told in chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew's Gospel. The Evangelist serves as a narrator, singing the biblical words verbatim. In this task, he is joined by all of the characters who speak in the gospel story: Pontius Pilate, Judas, Peter and various priests, maids, and witnesses. For textual clarity, Bach uses *secco* ("dry") recitative, in which the singer declaims the text accompanied by short keyboard/cello chords. For our performance, we use harpsichord for these recitatives, emphasizing the distinctiveness of the story itself, as opposed to the commentary from the other soloists. Of course, Jesus has a major part in the story; for the *St Matthew Passion*, Bach took great care to set his words apart from the rest of the characters. Rather than using *secco* recitative, Bach uses a string trio playing long notes to accompany Jesus, representing a halo over Jesus' head. Interestingly, the only time that the halo is taken away is when God turns away from Jesus on the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Turba (Crowd) Choruses. Just as the biblical characters are represented in the *secco* recitatives, so too are the crowds who clamor for Jesus' crucifixion. But even here, Bach draws on the considerable resources he had at hand to create a range of possibilities: Choir I or Choir II singing independently; the two choirs singing together in unison; and the two choirs singing antiphonally. In the case of the antiphonal *turba* choruses, the choirs often sing in homophonic blocks against one another, rather than using the polyphonic writing that we find in Bach's fugues. Such polychoral writing is actually quite rare in Bach's choral music. Four of Bach's six motets are scored for double choir, as are a handful of cantatas and one movement in the *Mass in B Minor*, but there are otherwise few examples of music for double choir in his output.

Solo Arias. As discussed above, there are fifteen arias in the *St Matthew Passion*, presented in a kaleidoscope-like combination of voices and instruments. In these arias, the singers often address themselves to Jesus directly, breaking into the action as if they cannot help themselves. This is a crucial element of Lutheranism: that the believers be directly and emotionally affected by the passion story, so that they might change their ways and follow God more closely.

Accompanied Recitatives. In addition to the biblical *secco* recitatives, the aria soloists almost always sing a short recitative-like movement preceding their arias. These recitatives are often highly emotional, being immediate and personal reflections on the actions the Evangelist has just described. Bach uses accompanied recitatives frequently in his cantatas and oratorios, often to explicate a theological concept or reflect on a biblical text. But in the *St Matthew Passion*, Bach does a particularly fascinating thing: every accompanied recitative is musically based on a repeating rhythmic pattern, known as an *ostinato*. That pattern, ranging emotionally from comforting to agitated to violent, immediately draws the listener into the soloist's psychological state. Further, the use of these *ostinati*, unique in Bach's major works, also binds together the larger structure of the work, since we come to expect these short movements that link the biblical scene to the more melodic arias that always follow.

Chorales. If the accompanied recitatives and arias represent the *Ich*—"I"—of the individual believer, then the twelve chorales (suggesting the twelve apostles) represent the *Wir*—"we"—of the congregation. The role of the chorales is very similar to that of the arias; the chorales break the fourth wall and comment on the story, while at the same time making the story personally applicable to the congregant. Further, these chorales would have been the only parts of the *Passion* with which the listeners were deeply familiar as each of the chorales was sung on a regular basis in Leipzig. The *St Matthew Passion* is particularly known for the five iterations of what has come to be known as the "Passion chorale"—Paul Gerhardt's 1656 *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* (most often translated as "O Sacred Head, now wounded"). These verses appear at various junctures in Bach's *Passion*, most powerfully following Jesus' death on the cross, when the choir prays that Jesus be with them at their own death—"When I must depart one day, do not part from me."

The “Choral Pillars.” All of these elements—the *secco* and accompanied recitatives, arias, and *turba* choruses—exhibit constant variety and infinite creativity throughout the *St Matthew Passion*. But the most significant architectural elements—like massive pylons that anchor a bridge at both ends and in the middle—are the three substantial choral movements that open the work and close each of the two major parts. The first movement opens with the first choir inviting the listener to come and mourn Jesus—the “Bridegroom.” The second choir interjects questions—“Who?... What?... Where?”, propelling the listener towards Calvary to witness the actions which unfold in the Passion story. Soaring above both choirs is a treble choir singing the great early Lutheran chorale *O Lamm Gottes unschuldig*, originally intended to be the Lutheran *Agnus Dei*, but later becoming associated specifically with Holy Week. The middle movement, *O Mensch beweine, dein Sünde gross*, also features a Passion chorale, this one a 23-verse reflection on the events surrounding the Crucifixion. This movement, closing the first part of Bach’s *Passion*, is a complex composition, with slurred sixteenth notes nearly omnipresent in the orchestra throughout. It is also highly chromatic; Bach employs difficult and dissonant harmonies when the text refers to Jesus’ death on the cross. Written for a single chorus, this piece actually began its life as the opening movement of the second version of Bach’s *St John Passion*, later finding its permanent place here in the *St Matthew Passion*. The final movement of the *Passion*, a double-choir lament for the entombed Jesus, also began its life in a different version—as the sarabande in the *Lute Suite in C Minor*. The sarabande, a Renaissance dance form, is appropriate here: the stately dance is associated with a serious, tender *Affekt* that can also refer to mourning, as it does at the end of each of Bach’s *Passion* settings—this movement in the *St Matthew Passion*, and *Ruhet wohl* in the *St John Passion*.

Why all of this variety? Why did Bach go to such great lengths to include so many different types of movements, and within those movements to vary so widely the combinations of soloists and instrumentalists? Obviously, part of it was determined by the arc of the story itself, as well as by the traditions that had accrued over the past century and more in Lutheran musical settings of the *Passion*. There is also Bach’s “encyclopedic instinct;” in so many of his major compositional projects, he strove to survey all of the various styles of music available to him. But I think there’s a little bit more as well. By marshalling such a panoply of musical elements in his *St Matthew Passion*, Bach draws together a universe of witnesses to the events of Jesus’ crucifixion and death. In so doing, he powerfully answers the opening movement’s invocation: “Come, help me lament the Bridegroom.”

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About CONCORA’s Artistic Director Chris Shepard – Chris Shepard has served as CONCORA’s Artistic Director since 2015, succeeding founder Richard Coffey in that role. He also serves as Music Director of the Worcester Chorus and the Masterwork Chorus of Morristown, New Jersey. With these choirs, Chris has performed a wide range of repertoire, collaborating with a number of major orchestras in venues that include Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and Radio City Music Hall in New York, as well as the Royal Festival Hall in London and the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. A conductor with a particular affinity for the choral music of J.S. Bach, Chris founded the Sydneian Bach Choir in Sydney, Australia, an ensemble that has performed all of Bach’s choral cantatas as well as all of his major choral works. He has taught at the Taft School, Sydney Grammar School and Holy Cross College. A pianist and keyboard continuist, Chris holds degrees from the Hartt School and the Yale School of Music, and the University of Sydney. His PhD dissertation on Bach’s *B Minor Mass* won the American Choral Directors Association’s 2012 Julius Herford Prize for outstanding doctoral thesis in choral music.