

BACH NOTES

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PUBLIC EXECUTIONS AND THE BACH PASSIONS

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Recently, while looking again through various older books of permanent value to Bach scholarship, I was struck by Arnold Schering's remarks, in his history of music in Leipzig, on the frequency with which the choristers of St. Thomas came into contact with death and dying. One takes regular encounters with death for granted during the period in question, when high rates of infant mortality, deaths during childbirth, uncontrolled infections, and so forth, contributed to a relatively short life expectancy; but Schering opened up a whole new train of thought when he also went on to refer briefly to public executions.¹ Though infrequent, executions occasioned a particular set of procedures to be followed by the students of St. Thomas.

The younger boys and *externi* stayed at home, to witness the salutary event with their parents, while the choristers participated through song. Schering instances one event in 1680 at which four boys sang eight chorales concerning death ("Sterbelieder") before the day of execution, and no fewer than seventeen chorales on the day itself, beginning at 8:00 in the morning. The "poor sinner," as he or she is always called in the official documents, had stolen a piece of linen, and Schering diverted attention away from the horror of it all by joking that converted Jews had it better, having to submit themselves to only two hymns.

Public executions in Leipzig are relevant to Bach scholarship not only because Bach's choristers took part in the ceremony but also because these executions parallel a particular execution of great importance: the one described in the Gospels. Well-known composers throughout Europe experienced executions, but, unlike Bach, they did not normally compose and arrange large, annual public Passion performances based on the Gospel verbatim, or set with such *Affekte* the Gospel's realistic description of the process from capture to death.

Those wailing baroque oboes at the start of the St. John Passion — rather unusual woodwind effects for J. S. Bach — signal a terrible story that can be understood in many ways. On the one hand, the Gospel Passion has elements of Aristotelian tragedy, such as terror, pity, hubris (is John suggesting that Jesus was too proud to answer back?), fatal error (Jesus' undenied sacrilege in threatening the Temple), and *peripeteia* (the moment when he could have been more conciliatory to Pilate, and the story could have gone another way). In Bach's setting of St. John's narrative there might even be a form of catharsis in the soloists' final farewell and in the chorus's concluding "funeral chaconne." On the other hand, the composer of a Passion, the choristers who sang it, the singing men, the organist, the instrumentalists, the clergy, and the congregation that heard it — all these people knew about executions, had watched the condemned walk to his own Calvary through the streets of Leipzig, and had the chance to read about it afterwards.

Many of the Passion performers had even participated in executions themselves, and would have recognized from personal experience several of the narrative moments so vividly described in the Gospel. First the capture (sometimes, one imagines, after a betrayal), the arrest and trial before the magistrate (one often no more involved than Pilate?), the witnesses (perjury was doubtless

known in Leipzig too), the lynch mob out for blood, and now and then a judge prevaricating under pressure. Then the condemnation, the handover to officers of the law, torment of one kind or another (those extant instruments of torture in German museums!), the ritual preparation (special clothing), the labeling (“King of the Jews”; did Leipzig murderers never have a shingle tied round their neck?), the procession through the streets, running the gauntlet to the killing field, public execution, death, and (a privilege of great significance in the Gospel) removal of the body by friends.

For J. S. Bach during his time at Leipzig, imagine two timetables. First, that of the personal biography: in 1723, he performed his audition cantatas in February; accepted the post in April; moved himself and his family from Cöthen, began work, and performed his first cantata in May; and was received formally into the school in June. Perhaps later that year, during the closed Advent period, he started creating and/or assembling music for a setting of the Passion according to St. John’s Gospel to be performed on Good Friday 1724. This work was revised for performance the following year, while the Passion (presumably) by Brauns was performed in 1726, and a version of the St. Matthew Passion was probably performed in 1727. The tradition of performing such pieces was special, and though evidently begrudged by the clergy, it nevertheless gave the church year an event of peculiar musical significance that is now recognized as having drawn an incomparable creativity from the composer.

But here is a second timetable. During the Advent season of 1723, one Susanna Pfeifferin, aged eighteen, “child-murderess,” was beheaded in public (as far as I know, no special arrangements were made for a condemned woman). A broadsheet was subsequently published with a block drawing showing the blindfolded girl kneeling and the executioner standing behind, dramatically wielding the sword in readiness. In 1727, a month or so before the St. Matthew Passion was premiered, another thief-murderer was beheaded, but only after several attempts.² Because he was convicted of a double crime, his body was not removed for (unconsecrated) burial but exposed on the raised, flat-lying wheel, and his head was nailed to a part of it (the hub?) and left for the ravens. All of this occurred at the Rabenstein, the place of execution beyond St. John’s Church outside the city gates and not so far from the city’s major cemetery in which Bach and his wife were themselves later interred. (On one occasion, workmen who had been ordered to build a new scaffold at the Rabenstein processed publicly through the town’s more elegant streets accompanied by the municipal wind players — the very men, presumably, who were called upon to play the wailing oboe parts in the St. John Passion.)

Other executions during Bach’s Leipzig period involved another “child-murderess,” miscellaneous thieves, and, on one single occasion during his final decade, three men together. The three were not crucified in the manner of first-century Roman Syria, but two were beheaded and a third broken on the wheel, reminding us how important it was for the Gospel to make the point that Jesus’ bones were not broken. In December 1732 — Advent again — the gallows had to be repaired because, although no one had been hanged for forty-five years (“a Jew” had been the last), the Council insisted it was correct in this case: the “poor sinner” was a foreigner from Bohemia (Roman Catholic?) and not entitled to a swift beheading. Decapitation by sword was honorable and reflected the status of the condemned (a soldier, a woman) or the relatively unheinous nature of the crime. For the heinous, there was hanging or worse.

The Council’s chronicler and the town’s printers made sure that none of these executions passed without record: not for nothing was Leipzig one of Europe’s main centers for publications of all kinds. In the case of one particular “thief and church robber” beheaded in November 1721, a handsome report was published, complete with pictures of the “poor sinner,” showing him in his

cell looking wretched and giving several glimpses of the place of detention.³ Such reports sometimes mentioned the condemned man's clothes: one was "nicely dressed for the day of execution, with scarlet hose and a fine white shirt." (On this occasion, however, the sword stroke was botched and had to be done again.) Printed descriptions seem to relish those occasions on which a poor sinner meets death bravely, acknowledges the justice of the sentence, thanks the attending clergy, and, if possible, takes off his outer clothing himself. Such behavior was presumably a sign that he had laudable self-control, which the crowd admired. After the deed was done, his relatives were welcome to re-attach the head (!) and show the body to the curious, of which, no doubt, there were quite a few.

The proud and famed University of Leipzig also found itself involved in executions. In the year of Bach's appointment a student was convicted of murder, and the beadle (legal officer) and other representatives prepared the execution: a contingent of fifty soldiers accompanied the procession "from the place of the academic council to the place of judgment," and the swordsman was given the order. But the student was not there. He had already fled and had to be beheaded only *in effigie* — literally, for one of the executioner's assistants carried a portrait of him.⁴ Whether or not the university's elaborate ritual was performed in order to establish that the student was henceforth an outlaw, fair game for any robber or even murderer, as was the case when the Duke of Weimar punished an absconding horn player by hanging him in effigy,⁵ I do not know. But at that time in England the two universities did have such powers.

The various official reports often make a point of saying that "the usual formalities" were observed, and this is where St. Thomas's Church was involved, for we know what these formalities were at the time of Bach's tenure. Two years before Bach's arrival in Leipzig, and again some time after his death, official regulations had been drawn up "for what the chief people of the town have to supervise" on these occasions, which were formalized affairs.⁶ Although public executions in Leipzig were not very frequent (thirty-nine in the whole of the eighteenth century), they were presumably all the grimmer, the "poor sinners" generally being known in the community — more so, I imagine, than in modern-day Texas. The directives in force when Bach took up his post concern first and foremost the arming, placing, and functioning of "the whole garrison of soldiers" stationed in the city, but other aspects of the proceedings are also covered in some detail. The regulations make clear a host of bureaucratic points about who is responsible for what, including the supply of specified refreshments (lemons, coffee, beer) for those officiating. One learns too that the superintendent or chief pastor of the town appointed two clergy to accompany the condemned, and that the rector of the St. Thomas School sent boys to sing at the start of the procession, which was formed at the place of detention near the Pleissenburg, the official seat of royal authority in the city, a few streets away from St. Thomas's. The rector could leave the duty of accompanying the boys to other clergy, and the hymns, whose texts probably concerned the hope of salvation, were chosen by the presiding judge, although Bach, as director *chori musici Lipsiensis*, was ultimately responsible for them.

The choristers did not sing until the condemned was brought out and shown to the crowd; the prisoner then descended the "great flight of steps" that led down to the procession route. The drama of this is clearly deliberate, reminding one of that moment in the Gospel narrative when Jesus is shown to the crowd: *Ecce homo!* (Painters representing this moment in the Passion story had also witnessed this stage of public executions.) The earlier occasion referred to by Schering suggests that choristers could also sing to the condemned in his cell during the preceding days. (One wonders if the prisoner in his cell imagined St. Paul in his or imagined the part played by hymns in Acts.) Perhaps the boys sang in these instances by special request, and were paid accordingly, as chantries were once funded by masses said for the dead. The procession route

taken by the condemned man is carefully described in the regulations, presumably for the sake of the officer in charge of the detachment, so that he might deploy guards at strategic points.

A number of questions concerning the continued involvement of the choristers in the ceremony remain unanswered. Did they accompany the procession? If so, how far? All the way to the place of execution or did they go no farther than, say, the Grimma Gate, the city's entrance/exit adjacent to the university and St. Paul's, leading out towards St. John's and the Rabenstein. And what about Bach? If the choristers accompanied even part of the procession, was the cantor present as well? Did Bach rehearse them or did he leave that to a prefect? In his signed agreement with the school, Bach had pledged to walk with the boys at every funeral;⁷ the procession to the execution was not strictly speaking a funeral march, but the rector had the power to order Bach to participate, just as the superintendent had this power over the lower clergy.

Whether or not the choristers and cantor were at the execution is perhaps a minor point, for the heavy ritual of it all — the military drums, the cavalry, the foot soldiers, the robed officials, the background silence in the town — was patent enough and would in any case have made a deep impression. The city gates were closed for the event; there was no market, and only after the fatal blow were the gates opened again. One procession depicted in 1722 shows some one hundred soldiers, a mounted escort of fourteen, plus six coaches containing, presumably, the “chief people of the town.” Such a military presence implies large crowds that had to be controlled. Since Bach's churches drew their congregations from the inhabitants of the inner city, these crowds must have included a large portion of Bach's Passion audiences.

Can we today, then, hear “Ach Golgotha” of the St. Matthew Passion or the lynch mob scene of the St. John Passion in any way approaching the way they were heard by members of Bach's congregations who had actually witnessed executions? The parallels between the Passion story and actual events in their city could not have been missed by performers or listeners: the bringing out of the condemned, the procession, the soldiers, the reference to the condemned's clothes, what he said as he died, the presence of the people, the scaffold outside the city gates. The spectacular final chorale of the St. John Passion may have been a way of recognizing in general terms the Passion story's message of hope, but many of its listeners knew that things were different for the “poor sinner” out there in the Rabenstein with his head on a spike.

A particularly interesting motif in the Passion story, though one to which listeners today are not always alerted, is the role of the military. For the inhabitants of Leipzig, the part the soldiers played in the Gospel's narrative was realistic and familiar: they ensured judicial formality and legality, they were there to save Jesus from the lynch mob, they scabbled over his vestments (one of St. John's many allusions to what the scriptures foretold), and they were in charge of events after the execution (friends' disposal of the body, etc.). As in Roman Syria, so in Saxon Leipzig. One of the most special moments in the St. Matthew Passion is the captain of the guard's recognition of the “Son of God”: did the commanding officer in Leipzig ever express sympathy for the condemned? If he did, the people would have been reminded of this moment in the Gospel, and the music's tender treatment of it; if he did not, then all the more miraculous was the centurion's revelation in the Gospel, and the more striking Bach's setting. There would probably have been a hint of sedition in a commanding officer expressing faith in an executed man, and one wonders how many Lutherans of Bach's time knew that a particularly significant number of early Christian martyrs were soldiers.

Appropriately for Good Friday, both Bach Passions end with Jesus in the tomb and without mentioning resurrection. Of course, two days later it is in this very respect that scripture diverged

miraculously from the kind of stories told on those execution broadsheets bought by the curious on the streets of Leipzig.

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Today, a visitor to Leipzig can see a sword—a handsome weapon with a steel blade, brass hilt, and a leather case decorated with brass—hanging up in a glass case in the Municipal Historical Museum. From 1721 this sword belonged to three successive generations of the Gebhardts, the *Scharfrichterfamilie* or executioner family. Just as playing the organ was the family trade of all those early Bachs, so, in part, was chopping off heads for the Gebhardts. Their reputation or standing in the city is not known to me, but to this day in the Town Church of Prague one can see a small, special cage-like gallery in which the municipal executioner could attend mass without being molested by the people. After all, he stood for resented authority and must have dispatched a relative of one or two members of the congregation. One Leipzig report quoted by Schneider speaks of the “poor sinner” being an acquaintance of the executioner, indeed a *Dutzbruder*, i.e. they addressed each other with “Du.”

Note the date of the Museum’s sword, 1721: in that year not only were the formal regulations for executions remade, but Bach’s predecessor Kuhnau also performed the first of the new-style Passions, and established the tradition upheld by his successor. This sword must have been used in executions during Bach’s lifetime, including those few in the marketplace itself, a stone’s throw from St. Thomas’s Church. One imagines the weapon being borne to the Rabenstein with due pomp, as the regulations say. Strange irony! — that one of the very few non-musical artifacts in present day Leipzig connected with J. S. Bach, if tenuously, should be this sword.

There is a strange postscript to this account, and one again connected in a peculiarly indirect way with music. This sword hanging in the Leipzig Museum might have been used for the last public execution in the town, which took place on August 27, 1824. (The public executions so unforgettably described in Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* and Scott’s *Heart of Midlothian* recorded the last years of such events in Protestant Europe.) In 1824 the official wielding this sword, or perhaps using his own, was the Saxon executioner Körzinger, who was of higher rank than the Leipzig town official who usually dispatched this task. Körzinger was probably brought in especially for this execution because the “poor sinner” was a serving soldier. The records, of course, show who he was: none other than the wife-killer Johann Christian Woyzeck, society’s victim and hero of Georg Büchner’s play of 1836 and Alban Berg’s opera *Wozzeck* of 1925. Is it really possible that the sword now hanging in the Museum in Leipzig chopped off the head of *Wozzeck*?

1 Arnold Schering, *Musikgeschichte Leipzigs*, vol. 2, Von 1650 bis 1723 (Leipzig, 1926), 90-1.

2 Wolfgang Schneider, *Leipzig: Streifzüge durch die Kulturgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1995), 187.

3 Schneider, 181.

4 Schneider, 186.

5 Andreas Glöckner, “Gründe für Johann Sebastian Bachs Weggang von Weimar,” in Bericht über die wissenschaftliche Konferenz zum V. Internationalen Bachfest der DDR in Verbindung mit dem 60. Bachfest der Neuen Bachgesellschaft, Leipzig, 25. bis 27. März 1985, ed. Winfried Hoffmann and Armin Schneiderheinze (Leipzig, 1988), 141.

6 Schneider, 180ff.

7 Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze, eds. *Schriftstücke von der Hand Johann Sebastian Bachs*, vol. 1, *Bach-Dokumente* (Kassel, 1963), 178.