

“Did You Know...?” – A look at some of the magic and mystery in Bach’s Matthew-Passion

For the ASO Chamber Chorus

by Jeffrey Baxter | February 15, 2012

In the spirit of one of the daily fixtures from Wikipedia’s main page (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) that is called “Did You Know... ,” I have assembled for you all a brief list of some of Bach’s amazing musical means for constructing this massive retelling of a familiar tale.

I hope it will deepen your appreciation of a masterpiece that continually reveals its mysteries and beauties with each repeated encounter one has with it in life.

Did you know...

...that at its first performance in 1729, a lengthy sermon separated the two Parts of Bach’s Matthew-Passion?

...that the presence of certain archaic German words in the narrative of Bach’s Matthew-Passion - words like “hie” [hier= here] and “itzt” [jetzt = now] - come from the fact that the German version of the Bible used by Bach (and his employers) was Martin Luther’s 1534 translation?

...that, technically, Bach’s Matthew-Passion is considered an oratorio? However, famed stage director Peter Sellars in 2010 noted that Bach composed the piece “not as a concert work, and not as a work of theater, but as a transformative ritual reaching across time and space, uniting disparate, and dispirited communities...”

...that Bach’s decision to double his efforts in this Passion-setting by employing two orchestras and two choruses stems from the 17th Century North German Lutheran sacred music tradition of the poetic “Dialogue” between the soul and Jesus? In Bach’s hands this poetic rhetoric is elevated to a whole new level. Again, in Sellars’ description:

“Bach represents the universe in this piece with 360 degrees of cosmic forces – two orchestras face each other, two choruses face each other, with the hovering high-altitude aerial presence of children singing [above]... He begins [in No. 1 of Part I] with a spectacular image of the divided self, our divided selves, distance and separation calling across a void. We are of two minds, and out of sync with ourselves. But with the chorales, which embody the process of realization that somebody else’s story is in fact our own, Bach holds out the promise of unison on the way to unity. Bach’s plan of narrative, call and response is interrupted by spontaneous moments of inspired individual breakthrough, and shocking moments of collective impulse followed by second thoughts and complete reversals.”

Did you know...

...that Leonard Bernstein was once asked: "Why couldn't Bach just write a simple tune?" -Bernstein's response? "Bach could easily compose a simple tune.... -one, two, three, and even nine tunes... at the same time!"

...that Bernstein referred to the presence of the chorale, "O Lamm Gottes unschuldig" - sung in unison in the Matthew-Passion's turbulent chorale-prelude style opening movement - as "an island in a river?"

...that Bach's work unfolds on three temporal "planes" (as described by Robert Shaw)? They are:

1. Historic Time - the narrative as recounted by the Evangelist (Matthew), when he describes all the action in the past tense, "He did this," "They did that," "And then this happened..." as well as the "flashbacks," or cinematic "cuts" to the dialogue of all the named characters, sung in the present tense: Jesus, Judas, Peter, Pilate and the crowd -- the choral "mob scenes" (*turba* choruses) of Chief Priests at the Hearing, street-crowds of witnesses, scribes and elders at the Trial and Crucifixion, and even the twelve Apostles.

2. "All" or "Any" Time - as seen in the solo numbers (arias and duets), usually presented in the first person singular point of view ("I" and "me"). These more intimate, personal and introspective interpolations into the narrative are perhaps Bach's greatest contribution to the tradition of the sung Passion. Their poetic texts (written by Picander and chosen by Bach) represent reactions to and reflections on the Passion's events. Sellars, again, writes:

"Bach's vocal soloists take arduous journeys through winding, twisted, extreme vocal lines, encountering obstacles, hesitating, starting again, trying another way, gathering force, repeating, reinforcing, losing, and finally gaining the repose that they have been searching for which was awaiting them all along in their own hearts.

"Bach offers each exposed and vulnerable soloist extraordinary companions for the road – courageous instrumentalists who match the vocalists in daring, intensity, and tenderness, offering radiant examples of sustained compassion.

3. Contemporary Time - the chorales, more often than not sung in the first person plural ("we" and "us"), reflect the contemporary "community of believers" (Bach's fellow congregants at St. Thomas Church - or, in the case of our modern-day audience, a community of believers, doubters, non-believers, etc.). The chorales' sometimes sudden interruptions of the narrative heighten the dramatic tension with their contrast - such as when the chorus (in No. 36d) that sings the angry words of defiance as they spit and strike at Jesus, "Wer ist's der dich schlug? [Who is it now that hits you?] almost in the same breath changes character and speaks with a voice that reflects, in horror and shame, "Wer hat dich so geschlagen? [O Lord, who dares to strike you?]

Did you know...

...that Bach's brilliant halo-like effect of accompanying strings to frame all of the words of Jesus (sung by a bass) was inspired by a similar use, 100 years earlier, by Dresden composer Heinrich Schütz in his "Sieben letzte Worte" [Seven Last Words], where a duo of violins frame all of Jesus' words? Bach goes a step further by using a whole orchestra of strings, and then stops them cold at Jesus' last words (in the Matthew gospel), "Mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?" [My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?].

...that in Part I Bach employs a musical version of foreshadowing? In the violin-figure that accompanies Jesus' words in the Last Supper scene "Take, eat, this is my body,"



he foreshadows the introduction of the ensuing soprano aria, "Ich will dir mein Herze schenken" [Lord, to thee my heart is given]:



Did you know...

...that Bach utilizes throughout the Passion a musical representation of the cross? At many moments when the cross is mentioned, or alluded to, Bach's melodies literally cross themselves, in a jagged, torturous way, such as:

1. At the very first line spoken by Jesus (in No. 2), where he sings about the Son of Man being given up to be crucified:



2. And in the soprano aria in Part I, "Blute nur" [Bleed and break] - the agonizing reflection on Judas' mercenary decision to betray Jesus. Here the cross is represented in the first four notes and is used *leitmotiv*-style, suggesting the coming crucifixion:



3. And in the music of the angry mob who scream for Jesus' execution (No. 45b):



Did you know...

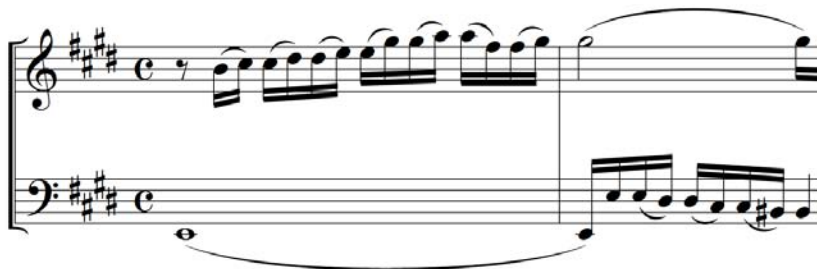
...that Bach made clever use of numerology (and text-painting) in the little chorus of the twelve disciples at the "Last Supper?" Jesus foretells that one of them will betray him. They sing exactly eleven complete statements of the phrase, "Herr, bin ichs?" [Lord, is it I?]. Twelve minus one equals Judas...

...that Bach employs canonic technique for the scene where the two false witnesses are produced to twist Jesus' prophetic words against him in the trial scene? They sing in strict musical imitation, one after the other, "Er hat gesagt..." [This fellow said...], in a musical form of "double-talk" to let us know these accusers intend ill will.

...that musicologist Karl Geiringer noted some interesting numerology in the short recitative (No. 34) that follows the abovementioned duet of false witnesses? It is a reflection on Jesus' silence when falsely accused: "Mein Jesus schweigt zum falschen Lügen stille" [He answers not; false witness He will suffer]. Aside from the obvious text-painting of the silence (eighth-note rests between each beat), the solo voice is accompanied by exactly 39 chords, which could indicate a reference to Psalm 39: "I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me."

...that in Part I, to depict the agony of the "Good Shepherd" in Gethsemane, Bach incorporates tone-painting by having an oboe accompany the tenor in "Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen" [I would be with my Jesus watching]? It plays above the antiphonal choirs like a "solitary wakeful shepherd" (-Sellars).

...that at the end of Part I, after the Evangelist has described the Apostles' fleeing Jesus in Gethsemane, the orchestra introduces the chorale-prelude, "O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß" [O man, bewail your grievous sin], with a set of ascending and descending figures that represent this flight in different directions?



...that this same gesture of ascending and descending music of flight is recalled near the end of the Passion? Immediately following the scene where Jesus is taunted on the cross

by a jeering crowd (and by both thieves executed alongside him), Bach inserts a meditation of childlike simplicity for alto and chorus (no. 60). It is in stark contrast to the violence of this scene. The poet's words evoke birds and their flight (here in Robert Shaw's translation):

Live here, die here, softly rest.
Little birds must have a nest.

Come, then! (Where?) Let Jesus hold you.

Then, in the postlude of this number, Bach recalls the flight-music of "O Mensch beweine," suggesting fleeing once again, but this time not away from fear, but into Jesus' arms:



Did you know...

...that Bach uses the chorale-tune "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden" [O Sacred Head Now Wounded] no less than five times in his Matthew-Passion setting? Each time he fashions a different harmonization of the tune, proving how a mastery of musical harmony can be a technical means to an expressive end by coloring the character of every dramatic interpolation.

...that in Part II, for the aria "Komm süßes Kreuz," [Come blessed cross] - the moment in the drama where Symon of Cyrene bears Jesus' cross for him - Bach embeds the chorale-tune "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden" [O sacred head, now wounded] in the bass-line that accompanies this aria:



...that, as so often with Bach, one of the most stunning musical moments occurs at precisely .618 of the piece (the so called proportional "Golden Mean")? It is the suspended-in-time continuo-less soprano aria, "Aus Liebe" [For love] - a reflection on the moment when Pilate asks the mob, "But what evil has he done?" By stopping the action cold (director Anne Patterson instructs us in our production to "freeze"), Bach weaves his long flute-melody over a sustained soprano solo, while two lone oboe da caccia accompany. By removing in this instance the very basis of all Baroque music, the basso continuo, Bach has literally moved the ground from beneath our feet. It is a moment of heartbreaking stillness at the emotional and dramatic highpoint of the Passion.

Did you know...

...that the famous aria (No. 39), "Erbarme dich" [Have mercy, Lord] - a tearful reflection on Peter's guilt over denying Jesus - is set by Bach as a pulsing 12-beat *siciliano* for alto and solo violin?

...that the moment of Peter's denial is the only place in Bach's dramatic setting where two responses are given back-to-back? They are the abovementioned aria "Erbarme dich," followed immediately by the chorale, "Bin ich gleich von dir gewichen" [Have I also from you parted?]. *On a personal note: did you know... how difficult it is to sing the light, high tenor part of this chorale when you are choking back tears at this moment in every performance?*

...that the accompanying flute-figure for the scene of indignant High Priests and elders, "Was gehet uns das an?" [And what is that to us?] recalls the tune of the preceding aria, "Erbarme dich"? What could this mean? -Perhaps a suggestion of mercy to all, even to the accusers?



...that the whipping string figuration (below) that introduces the alto recitative (No. 51), "Erbarm es Gott!" [Have mercy, God!], is a musical representation of the scourging of Jesus? It sounds very much like the same "scourging" string-gesture Handel would later use in his 1742 oratorio, *Messiah*, at the words "He gave his back to the smiters..."



...that near the end of Part I - at Jesus' arrest - in the soprano/alto duet (No. 27a), "So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen" [Alas, my Jesus now is taken], Bach writes three *appoggiaturas* (extra, added non-harmonic tones in small print) in the oboes and flutes that introduce the duet, but that these eighth note grace-notes are missing in the vocal lines that follow? Most singers include them, but the real choice comes in what rhythmic values to use in both playing and singing them. Conductors have arrived at various solutions. Simon Rattle for instance, in his 2010 performances, chose for each triple appearance of these *appoggiaturas* a strict descending pattern of sixteenth note / eighth note / quarter (followed by two 8^{ths}). -Perhaps a musical allusion to Father, Son and Holy Ghost? -Or a gesture of ever-increasing anxiety?

Did you know...

...that in minutes of music, the Matthew-Passion is the longest single work of Bach's? Why? Beyond the fact that - of the four gospels - Matthew's is the most lengthy and detailed account, Bach intentionally composed for his "audience" - and bequeathed to our high-speed internet and Twitter-ed age - one of humanity's "very few examples of sustained, collective self-reflection and mourning" (-Sellars).

"Perhaps what we can do as artists is offer an approach to the piece that is for each of us individually, and for the shared moments of our short time here together, in a concert hall, and on the face of the earth, very personal."

I like to think - that with your hard work and dedication - we are doing just that, here in Atlanta in March.

Bach: St. Matthew Passion

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra / Robert Spano, conductor

Heidi Grant Murphy, soprano / Kelley O'Connor, mezzo-soprano / Thomas Cooley, tenor / Stephen Powell, baritone

Thomas Glenn, tenor (Evangelist) / Dietrich Henschel, baritone (Jesus)

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chamber Chorus - Norman Mackenzie, director

The Gwinnett Young Singers - Lynn Urda, director

Anne Patterson, stage director

<http://www.atlantasympphony.org/ConcertsAndTickets/Calendar/2011-2012/Bach-St-Matthew-Passion.aspx>