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978-1-107-40460-1 - Bach's Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions

John Butt

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Bach's Dialogue with Modernity

Providing a detailed analysis of both Bach Passions, this book represents an important contribution to the debate about the culture of 'classical music', its origins, priorities and survival. The angles from which each chapter proceeds differ from those of a traditional music guide, by examining the Passions in the light of the mindsets of modernity and their interplay with earlier models of thought and belief. While the historical details of Bach's composition, performance and theological context remain crucial, the foremost concern of this study is to relate these works to a historical context that may, in some threads at least, still be relevant today. The central claim of the book is that the interplay of traditional imperatives and those of early modernity renders Bach's Passions particularly fascinating as artefacts that both reflect and constitute some of the priorities and conditions of the Western world.

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Preface

There are many things that a book about Bach's Passions could attempt. Most obvious, perhaps, might be the sort of study that outlines the historical context of Passion settings and the role of Passions in Bach's career, followed by an exhaustive study of the Passions that Bach wrote and performed, their chronology and the details of each version and its performing forces. Readers requiring a book of this kind should, without hesitation, leave this one aside and acquire Daniel R. Melamed's *Hearing Bach's Passions* (Oxford University Press, 2005). Melamed also addresses larger questions about the identity of musical works in the light of the variability of their original texts and performing circumstances. Other readers might seek an interpretation of these works in terms of their theological implications and Bach's Lutheran context. Here, the list of possible books and articles is extremely extensive, but obvious places to start might be Eric T. Chafe's *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) and Jaroslav Pelikan's *Bach Among the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

This book is hardly traditional Bach scholarship, although I would hope it will still be of interest to Bach specialists. Most important, I hope it will be a contribution to the debate about the culture of 'classical music', its history and possible future. I certainly set out to provide a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the two Passions together, although the angles from which each chapter proceeds are not necessarily those of a typical music guide. My overall priority is to attempt to examine these complementary works in the light of the broader culture that has tended to accord value to Western art music. Therefore, I propose to raise the stakes surrounding the question of why it is worth performing, listening to, or studying Bach's music at all. I do not by any means ignore the details of Bach's composition and performance of the Passions, nor the theological issues, but my foremost aim is to relate these to a historical context that may, in some threads at least, link Bach's way of life to ours. This does not mean that I am searching for stable, universal qualities that somehow transcend all contexts and peoples, but I assume, rather, that the types of experience this music might seem to suggest or set in motion (in performance, or, in rarer circumstances, in

reading or study) could relate to both our constitution and our understanding of the Western world.

The broader culture (attitude, way of thinking) to which I relate Bach's Passions I describe as 'modernity', a concept I attempt to elucidate in the Introduction. It is within the mindset of modernity, I claim, that these works have their considerable value, in the way they both reflect and constitute some of its priorities and conditions. While the same might be said of much art music of the Western tradition, what I believe to be particularly important is the fact that these works also relate to many processes that are pre-modern, non-modern or even anti-modern. They suggest the mutual inflection of modern and non-modern elements in a sort of dialogue that seems to be in action even before we start listening. It is perhaps this flexibility and quality of constant movement that renders the Passions significant for various stages of modernity (and also in those non-Western environments to which modernity has come later). The corollary is, presumably, that they are less likely to have such significance in cultures that modernity has hardly touched, or those in which modernity has somehow been surpassed or superseded (I can only touch on debates about 'postmodernity' in this study).

Throughout this study I use the direct translation of Bach's Lutheran-style titles of the two Passions, 'Matthew Passion' (*Matthäuspasion*) and 'John Passion' (*Johannespassion*), rather than the way they have tended to be translated into English, 'St Matthew Passion' and 'St John Passion' (the briefer usage is now fairly common in theological Bach scholarship in English). This perhaps can also suggest a more personal, human, interpretation of the persons of the respective evangelists, which is not without relevance for the approach of the present study. It also serves the more practical purpose of making quick comparisons between various movements across the two Passions more manageable. Indeed, if the alternation between the two becomes relatively rapid, I abbreviate the titles to 'MP' and 'JP'.

The numbers I give for the movements in each Passion (and consequently the bar numbers employed, except in Example 5.1, which presents an entire movement) are drawn directly from the editions of the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (NBA, published by Bärenreiter), edited by Alfred Dürr (*Matthäuspasion*, BWV 244, NBA II/5, 1972) and Arthur Mendel (*Johannespassion*, BWV 245, NBA II/4, 1974). These editions are the most authoritative for the two Passions (various justifiable gripes about the conflation of versions in the John Passion notwithstanding) and are readily available in miniature and vocal scores. For ease of reference, I give the numbering of each movement according to the NBA, together with the opening line of the respective

German text, in the Appendix. Wherever possible, I try to make my argument as convincing as possible for those who are not fluent in music notation, but there are obviously several places (especially in Chapter 5, which contains the greatest amount of musical analysis) where reading the score will be advantageous.

I give my own, relatively informal, translations of most German phrases in the main part of my text. The most informative literal translation of both libretti is provided in Michael Marissen's *Bach's Oratorios – The Parallel German–English Texts with Annotations* (Oxford University Press, 2008). The Gospels of Matthew and John (in Luther's German translation) provide the texts that Bach used for all narrative recitatives and for the choruses representing groups of people in the Passion story (the so-called 'turba', or crowd). However, an enormous proportion of the text in both Passions is essentially contemporary with Bach, by an unknown librettist in the case of the John Passion (drawing on some recent Passion poetry, particularly by Barthold Heinrich Brockes), and by a well-known Leipzig poet, Christian Friedrich Henrici (known as 'Picander'), in the Matthew Passion (for convenience, I will use 'Picander' in the remainder of the text). Picander's text, too, was partly derived from earlier sources (namely, Heinrich Müller). These respective texts would have been handed out to Bach's congregation as 'the libretto' and would therefore relate to the music for ariosos (inconveniently labelled 'recitativo' in the Matthew Passion, but distinct from the recitatives setting biblical text), all the arias and meditative choruses. The congregation's libretto did not include the biblical text or the chorales (both of which were presumably familiar), if Picander's publication of the Matthew libretto within his collected works is anything to go by.

It is impossible to thank all individuals and institutions that have enabled me to complete this study. I am particularly grateful to the Leverhulme Foundation for awarding me a two-year Major Research Fellowship, specifically to undertake this project. But it would have been impossible without the constant support of colleagues and the infrastructure of the University of Glasgow, which also gave me a few extra months of leave in exchange for my four years' service as head of its music department. I am also grateful to the Dunedin Consort, its trustees, donors, and most of all its musicians, for giving me the opportunity to perform both Passions on several occasions during the course of writing this book; also to Linn Records, who produced our recording of the Matthew Passion, which helped inform some of my approach (particularly in Chapter 4). Lest this period of over two years should seem too luxurious a time for preparing a book of this kind, I should also add that no thanks at all are due to the Higher Education Funding Council for

England (HEFCE, together with its Scottish counterpart, SHEFC), for whom I have been working on the music panel of the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Work for this took up much of 2008 in particular, and although it was both a privilege and highly stimulating to read (and listen to) over 400 'outputs' from researchers across the UK, the overall experience of quantifying quality in British academia is dispiriting.

Numerous people have been extremely generous in reading or discussing aspects of this work. I have probably forgotten some of the most crucial, but I shall try to list as many as I can: Jonathan Freeman-Attwood, Georgina Born, Jeanice Brooks, Laurence Dreyfus, Simon Frith, John Eliot Gardiner, Harai Golomb, Uri Golomb, Daniel R. Melamed and Reinhard Strohm. Particular thanks should go to the anonymous reviewers of the initial proposal, Roger Parker and David Yearsley, and also to those who gave me comments on the entire manuscript: Karol Berger, Robin Downie, Ruth HaCohen, Thomas Munck, Peter Smail, Bettina Varwig, and, again, David Yearsley.

I habitually – and very gratefully – dedicate my rambling monographs to my rambling family, the new arrival since my last such dedication being our fifth, and definitely last, child, Fergus. Unfortunately, the first months of this project also coincided with a departure, that of my father, Wilfrid Butt, who had introduced me to both Bach Passions before I reached double figures (it was also he who urged me to think more about Shakespeare in relation to this project, not long before he died). He would have been both pleased and puzzled by the final shape of the book, and he perhaps makes a cameo appearance in the Introduction as that (perhaps increasingly rare) type of figure within modernity who could somehow both be a scientist and retain some religious convictions, with neither direct conflict nor seamless connection. Finally, nothing of this would have been possible without the continual support and endlessly emerging talents of my wife, Sally.

Abbreviations

- BJb* *Bach-Jahrbuch*
- Dok* *Bach-Dokumente*, edited by W. Neumann and H.-J. Schulze, vols. 1–3 (Leipzig and Kassel, 1963, 1969, 1972)
- JP* John Passion (*Johannespassion*, BWV 245, *NBA* II/4, 1974)
- MP* Matthew Passion (*Matthäuspasion*, BWV 244, *NBA* II/5, 1972)
- NBA* *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*, edited by the Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Institut, Göttingen, and Bach-Archiv, Leipzig (Kassel and Basle, 1954–)
- NBR* *The New Bach Reader – A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, edited by Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York and London, 1998)

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