



Program Notes **March 16, 2025 - St. John Passion**

Dr. Joshua Harper, *Conductor*
Blake Beckemeyer, *Evangelist*
Presented by Arizona Philharmonic with Quartz Ensemble

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Listening to scripture in J. S. Bach's Passions

Daniel R. Melamed

In the long history of musical settings of the passion narrative, the two surviving compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach make the greatest demands on the listener in their length and complexity. One useful point of entry, especially for those who do not have much experience with early eighteenth-century music, is the settings' use of the Bible. Both by quotation and allusion, Bach's *St. John Passion* BWV 245 and *St. Matthew Passion* BWV 244 draw heavily on listeners' familiarity with scripture.

To find our way into the works, we need to understand the construction of the texts Bach set to music, whose organization derives from the liturgical function of the musical passion. In Leipzig, where Bach worked from 1723 until his death in 1750 and where he composed all his known passion music, that function was the presentation of a gospel narration of Jesus' crucifixion according to one of the four Evangelists. The large-scale musical passion was heard at the vespers service on Good Friday in the city's two most prominent churches, alternating each year with the chanting of the narrative in a much simpler musical form.

The liturgical requirement of literal gospel text was the organizing principle of Bach's settings. A listener to one of Bach's passions hears the familiar words of John or Matthew's narrative (or Mark's, in a work we know Bach composed but that is now lost). A tenor singer presents the words of the Evangelist in a simply accompanied kind of music that loosely imitates speech. Interlocutors whose first-person words are quoted—Jesus, Peter, Pilate, a young woman, and so on—are sung by others in a similar way. The words of groups (disciples, soldiers, passers-by, and most problematically in the *St. John Passion* "the Jews") are sung by an ensemble of voices.

The bulk of the narrative is delivered in a relatively neutral way, with an emphasis more on declamation than expressivity. The musical type used for this narrative, accompanied by low string instruments and a keyboard, owes something to liturgical chant but was principally borrowed from contemporary opera. There it was known as recitative and was used to present speeches and dialogue. Both operatic recitative and the settings of scriptural prose in the passions are usually neutral in affect—that is, in characteristic human emotions—and flexible in their metrical organization, more reportorial than evocative. (The words of groups are sung in more regular and metered music, usually with the participation of instruments; these settings often present their texts in a somewhat more emotionally expressive way.)

Nonetheless, the relatively neutral tone of the Evangelist's narrative in Bach's passions occasionally gives way to something more emotionally charged. For example, Peter's denial of Jesus that ends Part 1 of the *St. John Passion* is marked by the Evangelist's plaintive description of Peter's crying. The usual declamation of one note per syllable of text is replaced by a much more florid line, full of conventionally expressive melodic gestures and supported by evocative harmonies. The singer also repeats phrases of the text, in contrast to the straight-through narration in the rest of the setting. These features inflect the narrative with a great deal more emotion than in typical passages for the Evangelist. The other emotionally heightened moment comes just after Jesus' death, where an earthquake and the tearing of the Temple veil are described in heightened musical language. This episode is presented even more strikingly in the *St. Matthew Passion*, with similar musical gestures that likewise go beyond simple narration.

These must have been favorite moments in Leipzig. We can be sure of that because neither of these heightened moments in Bach's *St. John Passion*—Peter's weeping and the cataclysms at Jesus' death—appear in John's gospel. Rather they are borrowings in Bach's setting, the first from Matthew's gospel and the second from Mark's. Bach's anonymous librettist inserted these passages, presumably with the expectation that the composer would give them special treatment. And even the first attempt was apparently not sufficient; in one of the many revisions of the *St. John Passion* Bach undertook in performing the work over 25 years, he replaced Mark's description of the aftermath of Jesus' death with the even more vivid one from Matthew, and composed new music to fit the new words. (This is the version heard today; the first setting of this passage, according to Mark, is lost.)

Bach's passions also set additional texts, beyond the gospel narrative, and scripture plays a role in those as well. At all Lutheran services in Bach's time, the presentation of scripture went together with its explication. The principal weekly service, for example, centered on the reading of epistle and gospel and the delivery of a sermon on them. Good Friday vespers in Leipzig was liturgically simpler, but the presentation of a musical passion setting (effectively a gospel reading) was still closely linked to a sermon. In fact all of Bach's passions, as well as the passion settings by other composers he performed, are in two parts designed to be heard before and after the sermon. That construction highlights the moment in the narrative where the story is divided and where the sermon began: Peter's denial of Jesus and weeping in the *St. John Passion*, and Jesus' capture and his disciples' flight in the *St. Matthew Passion*.

In city churches, the weekly reading of Epistle and Gospel and their explication in a sermon was often enhanced by the performance of a musical work of a kind now called a “cantata.” A cantata sometimes presented words of the Gospels, but principally expanded on scriptural and interpretive themes in newly written poetry and in hymn stanzas. Something similar was part of a musical passion setting of the kind Bach composed. In the interest of encouraging the reflection on the crucifixion story urged by Martin Luther, an admonition explicitly emphasized in passion season hymns, the gospel text is enhanced with poetry. A librettist added poems to introduce and conclude the narrative and to interrupt it at significant moments for reflection and commentary. These texts and their musical settings guide the listener through the familiar scripture.

The interpolated poetry was of two kinds. The first consisted of newly written verse that marked significant moments in the story and encouraged reflection on them. These insertions also accomplished a principal goal of almost all early eighteenth-century music: moving the affections of the listener. The poems did this by invoking various affective states—sadness, remorse, joy, defiance, rage, and so on, and the musical settings followed suit, presenting conventional gestures and styles associated with those affects. The poems are mostly set for solo voices, except for the opening and closing poetic numbers, which call for all the voices and instruments but are otherwise constructed the same way as the solo pieces. This kind of composition—an affective setting for voice(s) and instruments of a short lyric poem—was called an “aria,” precisely the same kind of piece that made up most of contemporary opera. There it serves a parallel function, representing an opportunity for a character to express emotion in a pause in the drama.

In the passions, these poetic moments of reflection and affect are often closely tied to scripture. Of course they are linked to the passages in the gospel narrative to which they respond, but many also refer to other biblical texts. For example the opening choral aria of the first version of the *St. John Passion*, “Herr, unser Herrscher” (Lord, our ruler) sets the theological tone for the passion by highlighting Jesus’ paradoxical glorification in the abasement of the crucifixion. But it is not entirely a free poem; it is a paraphrase of Psalm 8, as biblically literate listeners would have recognized. And they would also have known that Martin Luther interpreted Psalm 8 as a messianic prophecy. The opening poetic movement of the *St. John Passion* thus invokes a Lutheran reading of an Old Testament text to frame the narration.

Passion settings include another kind of interpolation as well: individual stanzas of seasonal hymns (chorales) carefully chosen to be relevant to the moment of interpolation. Like the free poetry set as arias, they highlight moments, phrases, and words of the scriptural narrative. For example, in the *St. Matthew Passion* the disciples ask (in a chorus) “Herr, bin ich’s?” (Lord, is it I?) A reply comes in the form of a hymn stanza that begins “Ich bin’s, ich sollte büßen” (It is I; I should atone). Moments like this were probably meant to draw the believing listener into the gospel story by means of familiar hymns associated with congregational singing, even though it is likely that Bach’s congregation did not sing them in a passion performance.

A few of the interpolated hymn stanzas serve a second function, signaling the end of each of the *actus* (acts) into which the scriptural passion story was traditionally divided (garden, priests, Pilate, cross, and tomb). For example, in the *St. John Passion* the first *actus* in the garden is brought to a close by the chorale verse “Dein Will gescheh, Herr Gott” (May your will be done, Lord God). Sometimes the functions overlap, as here; this stanza also responds to Jesus’ words just before. In both senses this hymn and the others are a guide to the scriptural words that are at the center of Bach’s passion settings.

A contemporary listener to a Bach passion would have drawn on a knowledge of the Bible and of Lutheran interpretations of it in experiencing Bach’s passion settings. Both the narrative and interpolated commentary took that familiarity as a starting point for a sophisticated presentation not only of the crucifixion story, but also for a theological and affective glossing of it. Modern listeners can make this their starting point as well in understanding Bach’s response to the text.

Daniel R. Melamed is Professor Emeritus of Musicology at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and director of the Bloomington Bach Cantata Project. His book for general readers Hearing Bach’s Passions is available in an updated paperback edition from Oxford University Press.

MUSICIANS

Quartz Ensemble

Kirk Averitt, *Jesus*

Jordan Murillo, *Pilate*

Sarah Smith, *Maid & Soprano Soloist*

James Grandjean, *Attendant & Tenor Soloist*

William Nathan Vallandingham, *Peter & Bass Soloist*

Ariana Iniguez, *Mezzo-Soprano Soloist*

Sopranos: Katherine Rosenfeld, Emily Spencer

Altos: Courtney Evans, Vera Lugo

Tenors: Elijah Frank, Jacob Gilbert

Bass: Clayton Headrick

Arizona Philharmonic

Organ

Guy Whatley

Flute

Jeannette Hirasawa Moore, *Principal*

Andrea Graves

Oboe

Laura Arganbright, *Principal*
Mary Simon

Violin I

Ben Whitehouse, *Concertmaster*
Megan Evans
Luke Stikeleather

Violin II

Luke Hill, *Principal*
Elizabeth Jones
Ava Wipff

Viola

Bryn Cannon, *Principal - chair sponsored by RoJean Madsen*
Mason Haskett
Samara Humbert-Hughes

Cello

Barbara Metz, *Principal & Viola da gamba*
Claudia Vanderschraaf

Contrabass

Jason Howard, *Principal*



BIOGRAPHIES

Dr Joshua Harper, Conductor

Praised for his “inspired” conducting (The Daily Courier), **Dr. Joshua Harper** is thrilled to be going into his 5th season as Guest Conductor with the Arizona Philharmonic conducting Bach’s monumental *St. John Passion*. Harper was recently named the second Artistic Director for the Choral Society of Northeast Pennsylvania as they enter their 26th season. Along with their regular season programming, he will lead the Society in collaborations with the Northeast Pennsylvania Philharmonic and Maestra Mélisse Brunet. Shortly after his time in Arizona, Harper will lead the Wilkes Chamber Singers as they join forces with the Arcadia Chorale for Bach’s *B-minor Mass*, also in late March ’25.

Dr. Harper is currently the Director of Choral Activities and Assistant Professor of Choral Conducting & Applied Voice at Wilkes University in Pennsylvania. At Wilkes, he conducts the Chamber Singers and University Chorus. He also teaches music theory, and private voice, and serves as the musical director for all musical productions. He has performed on some of the

nation's largest stages, including Carnegie Hall and Jazz At Lincoln Center. Harper is the founder of the Quartz Ensemble, a fully professional chamber choir drawing singers from across the country of international renown. He maintains an active schedule singing, adjudicating, and presenting his research across Pennsylvania and Arizona, as well as engagements in Tennessee later next Spring. He holds the Doctor of Music degree from the Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University with a minor in Music History and Literature.

Blake Beckemeyer, *Evangelist*

Tenor **Blake Beckemeyer** thrives on exciting, small-ensemble performances working on historical and text-driven interpretations of Baroque, Classical, and modern music. He returns from being the tenor Virginia Best Adams Fellow at the Carmel Bach Festival, including performances as soloist with Grete Peterson and Michael Beattie. Beckemeyer looks forward to an exciting season featuring reprising appearances at the Bloomington Bach Cantata Project, Indianapolis Baroque Orchestra's collaboration with St. Paul's, Apollo's Fire's tour of *Messiah* throughout the Midwest, Alkemie Viols' collaboration with Incantare at Christmastime, and returns to Washington Bach Consort. The season features two performances of Bach's *St. John Passion* (Evangelist & Arias) with Quartz Ensemble and the Arizona Philharmonic, as well as the Indianapolis Baroque Orchestra and Christ Church Cathedral.



In past seasons, Beckemeyer has also been seen with Seraphic Fire, The Thirteen, True Concord, Oregon Bach Festival, the Valparaiso Bach Ensemble, Bach Ensemble-Helmuth Rilling, the Weimar Bach Cantata Akademie, the Fort Wayne Bach Collegium, both the Bloomington and Indianapolis early music festivals, and Tonos del Sur. Beckemeyer's work has taken him to record multiple discs and video recordings, including video recording for German state television, a Rocky Mountain Emmy award-winning video of Runestad's *Earth Symphony* for Arizona PBS with True Concord, and multiple Opus Klassik nominations for Vox Orchester's recording of Handel's *Alexander's Feast*.

Beckemeyer lives in Indianapolis with his wife, Shannon, and works as a software consultant in architecture for low-code and no-code platforms and data analytics and engineering.