

Sacred Texts in A Secular World: A Word To Nonbelievers – and Believers

by Michael Steinberg

- from *Choral Masterworks: A Listener's Guide*, with permission of Oxford University Press. The book, to be released in April 2005, includes 47 essays on the major choral-orchestral works of 28 composers, from J.S. Bach to John Adams. Many of the essays originated as program notes written for various symphony orchestras and were later revisited and revised for this book.

Many of the works discussed in these pages are settings of sacred Christian texts. The commentary on them is by a writer of Jewish birth who happily accepts for himself the description the Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer came up with to define his own stance: "a religion-loving atheist."

I think I am safe in assuming that many, perhaps even most, readers of this book will have at least a nominal connection with some branch of the Christian church, and that for those listeners such works as the Bach Passions have a significance and carry a meaning beyond the musical and the aesthetic.

Which raises a multitude of questions. Ought we to transport these towering musical achievements from the liturgical setting for which Bach imagined and composed them into the concert hall at all, or, thanks to recordings, into our living rooms? If we do take them into the concert hall, how should we respond? Or, to bring it more down to earth, how should we behave? Do we applaud? Is it right to have Chardonnay or a cappuccino between Parts I and II of the *Saint Matthew Passion* rather than a sermon? Also – and this is something I have been asked in all seriousness – do atheists, agnostics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus even have a right to listen to this music, let alone claim that they can make meaningful contact with it? And for that matter, what about compositions intended for the concert hall but involving biblical or liturgical texts – Handel's *Messiah*, for example, or the Verdi *Requiem*?

But let us return to the Bach Passions and consider some of the differences between hearing one of them in Saint Thomas's or Saint Nicholas's Church in Leipzig on a Good Friday in the 1720s, and hearing it in Carnegie Hall in the 21st century – leaving aside here all the vexatious issues of "authentic" performance practice (the number of singers and players, boy sopranos versus women, pitch, wooden flutes, gut strings, and so on).

We can begin by looking at the calendar. The chances are good that when you have an opportunity to hear one of the Passions in concert – even more so when you put on a CD at home – it will not be on Palm Sunday, Good Friday, or any other liturgically relevant occasion.

More important, we can look at ourselves and think about our 18th-century counterparts in Leipzig. They were at a church service, involved in an act of divine worship – and I allow for the presence of a few unwilling children or, for that matter, the burgher who was there to be a good example to his family and to assert his respectability to his neighbors. We may be at a concert or perhaps at home, absorbing – with more or less concentration and devotion – an entertainment. It is, to be sure, a special sort of entertainment, one with high spiritual potential, but it is an entertainment nonetheless. For those Leipcigers the music was part of something greater, a religious service on the darkest day of the church calendar. For us, the music is the main reason for being where we are, and if we are talking about a concert performance, we may well have bought our tickets as part of a package that brings us some distinctly secular music by Tchaikovsky or Richard Strauss as well. And probably there will be applause.

Ready to observe an especially solemn occasion, the Leipzig worshippers were seated in uncomfortable pews in what might, at that time of year, still have been a disagreeably cold

building. They got up early to be there and most of them walked. In addition to listening to two or three hours of Bach's music, they participated in prayers and, at half-time, they got a sermon – a long one – followed by the celebration of Holy Communion. In any case, Bach's music for them was not a hallowed classic; indeed, many of them found it needlessly complicated and thus irritating.

On the other hand, they had compensations. The most important was that the singers sang in German, in the listeners' own language. And by the way, just as you get the German text and English translation at a concert or in a CD box, so did the churches provide librettos: It was considered essential for everything to be understood, but the two main churches in Leipzig were huge, their cubic volume hardly less than that of a hall like Carnegie, and words could escape.

The congregational hymns or chorales provided another anchor. The congregation did not sing along with these at Passion performances, but still, the appearance of these familiar tunes and mostly familiar words meant solid ground, home, reassurance amid Bach's thickets of counterpoint with their snaking melodies and arcane harmonies.

We can be confident that there would have been more general knowledge of the Bible in a Lutheran congregation in the 1720s than in a concert audience today. Moreover, those Leipzigers would have been more untroubled readers of Scripture than their 21st-century counterparts, many of whom, even if they have not actually read such books as Raymond Brown's *The Death of the Messiah* and John Dominic Crossan's *Who Killed Jesus?*, are at least aware of the trend and tone of recent Biblical studies and criticism, and who read the Gospels, if they read and reflect on them at all, not as Revealed Word, but as culturally important documents that are a mixture of history remembered and "prophecy historicized" (Professor Crossan's phrase): hearsay, legend, lore, wisdom, and propagandistic interpolations.

We can be sure, too, that virtually no one in that Leipzig congregation would have noticed, let alone been troubled by, something that bothers a growing number of musicians today about the *Saint John Passion*, namely, the anti-Judaic tone of the account of Passion Week in the Fourth Gospel. (I touch on this in my essay on that work.) The assumption that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus is still lodged in the minds of some people; it was much more generally in the air in 1720s Leipzig. Probably not many worshippers in those churches had actually read Martin Luther's *The Jews and Their Lies*, but the sentiments and arguments in that book were common intellectual and emotional property. That most Leipzigers had never had contact with Jews, who were not allowed in the city except for the few days of the trade fair, would have made no difference: Anti-Semitism flourishes equally in the presence or absence of Jews. The often-subtle question of how the anti-Judaic element of John's Gospel is or is not reflected in Bach's music is searchingly discussed by Michael Marissen, who pronounces a resounding Not Guilty, in an interesting book, *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion*.

My own first meaningful encounter with the Bach Passions occurred when I was 18 or so and heard a recording of the *Saint Matthew Passion* made in Leipzig in 1941. It was important because it was the only alternative to a really dreadful recording by Koussevitzky, and that it came from Leipzig and involved the Saint Thomas Choir and its then-director, Günter Ramin, Bach's successor at I-don't-know-how-many removes, gave it a certain aura as well. I recognized its faults – huge cuts, spineless conducting, muddy playing by the Gewandhaus Orchestra – but the good things overwhelmed me. Chiefly, that meant the committed, searingly communicative singing of the soloists: Karl Erb, thought the greatest Evangelist of his time, and still unsurpassed; the honey-voiced Gerhard Hüsck, from whose recordings I had first learned the Schubert song cycles, as Jesus; the soprano Tiana Lemnitz, with her miraculously pure yet expressive singing; and a motherly contralto with the homespun name of Friedel Beckmann. It was enough to take me right to the heart of the work, or so it seemed to me at the time; certainly it took me closer to Bach than any previous experience I had had with his music.

The second time I had toted that huge and heavy stack of 78s from the library to my room something happened. I no longer remember just what it was, but I think it must have been some extraneous noise like that of a page being turned or a bow hitting a music stand. Whatever it was, it suddenly awakened me to the fact that this was not just Bach coming from the speaker, but that these were sounds made by particular human beings. And these human beings were Germans in Leipzig in March 1941, a year and a half into the war, with battles raging in North Africa, U-boat attacks in the Atlantic, London bombed nightly, concentration camps in operation.

Even then I was not so naïve as to think that the singer of Jesus in the *Saint Matthew Passion* had to be Christlike, or that the personal lives of the soprano and alto would be perfectly in tune with the messages of love, compassion, and consolation Bach had given them to deliver. Nonetheless, questions nagged. Were some of those singers and players members of the Nazi party? Did they wear swastika lapel pins? Had they used the so-called German greeting “Heil Hitler” when they arrived at the recording session, or did they still say “Guten Tag”? Did they sign their letters with that same “German greeting”? Did they look at the street-corner displays of the anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer*, and, if so, what did they think? Had they enjoyed Werner Krauss’s magnificent acting in that winter’s hit movie, the anti-Semitic *Jud Süß*?

Contact with the *Saint Matthew Passion* and with Bach had suddenly become complicated. To be sure, my questions were the special preoccupations of a Jewish refugee from Hitler’s Germany, but I soon saw that larger issues were involved. Works of art and the work of artists did not exist in a protected vacuum; they were part of the fabric of life, and life is a mixed-up mess that gives us incredible richness and beauty and lovingkindness but also Dachau and Golgotha. And having been pulled so powerfully, even violently, into the world of the *Saint Matthew Passion*, I suddenly felt pushed out again: an outsider, a non-Christian, a person who had been expelled from German life, culture, and language, face to face with a work that had been composed solely “to incite listeners to devotion” (in the words of Bach’s contract with the city of Leipzig).

Around the same time, I had the wonderful experience of learning the *Saint John Passion* by singing in the chorus – and there is no better way of possessing a piece of music than singing or playing it. Then I knew again that Bach’s Passions were addressed to me as well as to the parishioners of Saint Nicholas’s and Saint Thomas’s. I hear them differently, no doubt. I readily believe that there are dimensions I miss, but I also maintain that a musical person gets more from the *Saint John* or *Saint Matthew Passion* than the most devout imaginable Christian with a tin ear.

The critic Andrew Porter has written: “A great opera composer can make us believe anything.” Even if we omit the word “opera,” Porter’s claim is still true. Just think of what Beethoven puts over on us in the *Ninth Symphony*, how he can make us believe in the power of joy as no lecture or dissertation on joy could and, more important, as Schiller’s ode cannot do by itself. And I have never met a musical person – of whatever faith or lack of it – who is not moved, not stirred and awed, by those few seconds of music in the *Saint Matthew Passion* when the earthquake after the Crucifixion has subsided and the chorus sings, “Truly, this was the Son of God.”

Moreover, Bach’s sacred compositions – the cantatas as much as the Passions – deal with issues that go beyond matters of faith and dogma. To take just one obvious and dramatic example in the Passion story: betrayal. There is the sad figure of Judas, of course, but just now I am thinking of Peter. To Bach, Peter’s denial of Jesus and his pain at what he has done are so important that when the composer wrote the *Saint John Passion* he lifted words from the Gospel according to Saint Matthew and moved them into the text so as to intensify the narrative and to heighten this moment. And he set those words to the most agonized bars of music he penned in his whole life. I don’t believe there is a single person who has ever heard one of the Bach Passions who has not at some time committed some act of betrayal, great or small, and felt remorse for it, even lifelong remorse. This is music addressed to all of us. And have we not all known love, sacrifice, compassion, awe, transcendence, and the other facets of experience we encounter in the Passion story?

The great works of sacred art are not exclusive. In that sense, too, they are transcendent. And if we have had creative musicians who were deeply religious, as Bach and Stravinsky were, I have always derived a certain pleasure from remembering that some of the most transfiguring of sacred compositions were created by composers who never darkened the doors of a church unless to perform or listen to music, who subscribed to no orthodoxy, whose faith was shaky or outright nonexistent, who were engaged in an unceasing struggle to reinvent God, who were angry with him. I offer, in evidence, Handel's *Messiah*, the Beethoven *Missa solennis*, the Berlioz *Requiem*, Brahms's *German Requiem*, the Verdi *Requiem*, Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*, Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass*, Schmidt's *The Book with Seven Seals*, and *Sancta Civitas* by Vaughan Williams. "Religion-loving atheist," which we might expand to include "religion-loving agnostic," fits some of these great composers also.

I love William Bronk's poem *The Conclusion* (in his collection *Silence and Metaphor*):

I thought
we stood at the door
of another world
and it might open and we go in.
Well,
there is that door
and such a world.

Indeed, the door is there. It is not locked. When the Bach Passions and the *Missa solennis*, *Sancta Civitas*, and *The Book with Seven Seals* are sung and played, we are all invited.

Author Credit:

Michael Steinberg is a writer, critic, lecturer, and teacher. For many years he wrote program notes for the New York Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, and Boston Symphony. He was music critic of the Boston Globe, wrote liner notes for major classical labels, and served on the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music and the New England Conservatory. He lives in Minnesota.