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From the moment the St. John Passion begins, violins churning like turbulent rapids underneath the piercing tones of two warring woodwinds, it is immediately clear that the story about to unfold before us is one full of unbridled pathos. Bach sets Martin Luther’s German translation of the disciple John’s account of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion in recitative for the Evangelist (the voice of John’s narrator), Jesus, Pilate, and Peter, and in fast-paced, highly dramatic choral interjections. Known as “turba” (“crowd”) choruses, these interjections are sung by the crowd of Jews who ordered Jesus’ crucifixion.  Interspersed among the gospel, interludes of poetic Lutheran commentary are set as arias and chorales: the hymns which represent the most characteristic and beloved portion of Bach’s choral repertory.  The St. John Passion truly is a beautiful and moving piece of music, and because the music itself is so powerful, it may be tempting to appreciate it for its aesthetic value alone. To do so, however, would do a disservice to Bach’s intentions in composing the piece. Bach spent his life writing music with the impetus of a deep faith in the Lutheran church and theology, and his devotion pervades every pore of his music. Devotion and conviction of this level of intensity, however, often tend to attract controversy. While taking the theological and political challenges of the Passion into account holds the possibility of temporarily delaying your enjoyment of the music, I am convinced that the more you can educate yourself about its place in historical and contemporary artistic and religious dialogues, the richer your experience of the piece will be. This is a task I can not hope to accomplish within these short program notes; so, if this endeavor intrigues you, I suggest that you next turn to the essay “Luthernanism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach’s St. John Passion” by Michael Marissen, to whom I am greatly indebted for the following discussion. Like all great art, the St. John Passion reveals more of its wonders to listeners and musicians alike each time it is performed. This is a work full of musical, theological, and even political challenges, and I encourage you to approach tonight’s performance with an open mind and open ears.

The first performance of Bach’s St. John Passion took place on Good Friday 1724, in the St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig; and, while the version you hear tonight is quite similar in text and music to that 1724 version, Bach gave several markedly different performances of the piece over the next twenty five years. One might infer that Bach’s repeated editing of the piece indicates that he felt an exceptional personal attachment to it, and was presumably striving toward some kind of unattainable, God-like perfection. As Bach scholar Christoph Wolff notes, “Throughout his life Bach was his own severest critic…the ‘final’ version does not represent a definitive one but merely a further stage in the search for perfection – the central and ultimate concern of Bach’s method of composition.” If one were to travel back in time to the 1725 performance of the St. John Passion, for example, one striking difference would be immediately apparent, since in this year, Bach replaced the opening chorus “Herr, unser Herrscher” (“Lord, our ruler”) with the chorus that now closes the first half of the St. Matthew Passion, “O Mensch bewein dein Sünde groß” (“O man, bewail thy great sins”). The final impression of a listener from that year would also be quite different, since Bach also changed the closing movement, originally the chorale “Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein” (“O Lord, let your dear angel”), to a setting of the chorale “Christe, du Lamm Gottes” (“Christ, you Lamb of God”), which now be heard in his Cantata BWV 23. Furthermore, he removed the tenor aria “Ach, mein Sinn” (“O, my sense”), and added a duet for soprano and bass soloists, as well as two contrasting tenor arias. Bach worked several more changes into the St. John Passion in the 1730s (for example, removing and then replacing the insertion of the gospel of Matthew’s dramatic account of the earthquake and the tearing of the veil), and eventually in 1749, he settled on a version that is nearly identical to the original 1724 version. It seems likely that this version, being the first and last that was performed by Bach himself, is the one which Bach preferred over all others, and it is the one which is most frequently heard today.

For listeners who are familiar with Bach’s choral works, the temptation to judge the St. John Passion next to the larger, and perhaps better-known St. Matthew Passion is nearly unavoidable; moreover, in Bach scholarship of the last century, the St. John Passion does not often benefit from the comparison. While the St. Matthew Passion, scored for a double chorus, and clearly knit together by the recurring ‘Passion chorale’ tune (most often sung today with the text “O sacred head, sore wounded”), is often described as a more refined, balanced, and sophisticated work, in comparison, the vigor and propulsion the St. John Passion occasionally seems to teeter on the brink of madness. It is as if the former setting is told with the full consoling knowledge of the resurrection, whereas the latter takes place in the midst of the action, tormented by abrasive accusation, violence, and inevitable tragedy.

The abrasive quality to which I refer is the portrayal of the Jewish crowd in John’s gospel, which is relatively severe compared to the other Biblical accounts of the Passion. The chorus’s acute and unrelenting cries of “kreuzige!” (“crucify,”) sung from the perspective of the crowd of Jews demanding Jesus’ crucifixion, are made more potent by Bach’s expressive setting of the word in long dissonant suspensions. The crowd comes to life through Bach’s music: the music emphasizes the uncontrollable mob-mentality that is evoked in John’s text. However, Bach’s dramatic setting of the text should not by any means be mistaken for musical anti-Semitism. While portions of Luther’s later writings did, in fact, express anti-Judaic sentiments, Bach’s music instead reflects the strong Lutheran conviction that it is not Jews, but Christ’s own followers who bear the lion’s share of the responsibility for his death.

I would like to offer up two examples from Bach’s music which support this argument. First, let us examine the connections among the soprano aria “Ich folge dir gleichfalls” (“I follow you joyfully”), the Evangelist’s short section of recitative, “Simon Petrus aber folgete Jesu nach” (“Simon Peter, however, followed Jesus”), and the Roman soldiers’ sardonic cries (sung by the chorus) of “Sei gegrüßet, lieber Jüdenkönig!” (“Greetings, dear King of the Jews!”). We first hear the soprano aria, an eager and lighthearted proclamation of devotion. The soprano’s line begins on an F, leaping up to a B flat, outlining a B flat major scale up to the higher F, then soars back up to the higher G and down again. It is a vocal line that evokes images of skipping stones on still water, and suggests that the act of following Jesus is carefree and effortless. This thought is heartening, until we compare the musical structure of this aria with the other two examples given above. The Evangelist’s recitative at no. 8, “Simon Petrus aber folgete Jesu nach,” outlines the exact same B flat major melodic line. However, while this correlation initially suggests that Peter’s loyalty to Jesus is as lighthearted as the soprano aria, Christian listeners who know the Passion story well know that Peter is, in fact, about to deny any association with Jesus three times over. Perhaps then, the loyalty of Jesus’ followers, represented in such a carefree manner by the soprano’s aria, is not so steadfast as we might like to believe. Furthermore, Bach sets the Roman soldiers’ mocking greeting of “Sei gegrüßet, lieber Jüdenkönig" (after clothing him in royal purple) to a nearly identical musical phrase. In this chorus, however, the outline of B flat major is disjointed, lacking the smooth runs of the soprano’s aria and the Evangelist’s recitative. In their mimicry, it is as if the soldiers are revealing the purported loyalty of Peter and all Christian believers to be corruptible. Through this musical relationship, Bach transmitted to his Lutheran congregation the message that while the gospel text blames the Jews for Jesus’ death, it is in fact the sins and fallibility of Jesus’ followers which are at fault.

Bach’s placement of a chorale in which the collective Lutheran church with all of its future generations takes responsibility for Jesus’ suffering directly follows John’s account of Jesus being physically struck. This is exceptionally significant because in doing so Bach deviates from the norm that has been set by his predecessors and contemporaries. In the Passion libretto written by Bach’s contemporary Barthold Brocke (set to music by Handel, Telemann, and Reinhard Keiser), for example, the place of this chorale is filled with violently derogatory anti-Judaic language. Bach’s libretto, in stark contrast, equates humanity’s sins with Jesus’ suffering, setting the words “geschlagen” (“struck”) in the first verse and “Sünden” (“sins”) in the second with a powerfully dissonant suspension. Furthermore, the chorale’s second verse suggests that it is not the physical blows which cause Jesus pain, but rather the innumerable sins of his followers.

I hope that this discussion has, at the very least, given you a sense of what source materials Bach worked with and the setting in which he composed the St. John Passion. Furthermore, I hope I have left you with the impression that just below the surface of the stunning music heard at tonight’s concert, one encounters profound discourses between music and libretto, libretto and gospel, and gospel and Lutheranism. Lastly, I hope that tonight’s performance inspires you to probe further into these topics, and that you discover or continue to experience the exceptional spiritual and aesthetic enrichment that Bach’s music offers us.