

BACH



NOTES

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BACH SOCIETY

SONGS BOTH NEW AND OLD— A REVIEW OF THE BACHFEST LEIPZIG 2012

The annual Bachfest Leipzig ran from June 7 to 17 this year under the theme “...a new song’—800 years of musical tradition at St. Thomas.” An 800th anniversary is an extraordinary jubilee in itself, but to suggest Bach’s presence and historical significance in it with the motto “... a new song” (referring to Bach’s motet *Singet dem Herrn, ein neues Lied*, BWV 225) is a testament to the emergence of the music Bach made in Leipzig from a long and proud tradition, and the impact he, together with the school and its choir, has made on this venerable institution. The tradition remains intact in our day, and will surely continue in the future. The Bachfest’s theme was thus felt in every event, and its meaning was even more resonant when events were held in Leipzig’s historic venues. The programmes were structured around the recurring old favourites—a Passion (either St. John or St. Matthew), the Goldberg Variations, and the B-minor Mass. For a regular visitor, the Bachfest Leipzig 2012 retained its identity as well as its characteristic warmth and welcoming



Ton Koopman conducting in Leipzig’s Nikolaikirche. Photo by Gerd Mothes, Bach-Archiv Leipzig

atmosphere. One could not help but notice the increased number of foreign visitors, especially from America. Of the 123 events held over the 11-day festival, the flagship concerts were held in the two principal churches (the Nikolaikirche and the Thomaskirche) and the Gewandhaus, and drew in large audiences. Equally popular was a series of recitals called “Ausgezeichnet” (“Award-Winning”), a kind of platform for emerging young talents who have won the International Bach Com-

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petition in recent years. Many programme items that have become regular features of the Bachfest over the years were retained in this year's programme. The Sunday services offered a glimpse into a tradition to which Bach himself contributed. Organ tours to neighboring towns were an opportunity to enjoy a relaxing day out in the beautiful and peaceful countryside. Members of the Bach-Archiv gave lectures on their latest discoveries and the implications of those discoveries. As part of this year's museum offerings, two of Bach's Bibles were displayed together. Finally, an exciting outdoor concert entitled "Bach on Air" took place in the central marketplace. Newly introduced this year was a series called "b@ch for us," featuring educational concerts for children and families. I attended one of these events in the Nikolaikirche on the afternoon of Sunday, June 10th. As could be surmised from its title, "Geheimcode B-A-C-H" ("Secret Code B-A-C-H"), the concert explained the tone series of Bach's name and showed how the row of notes came to inspire not only members of the Bach family but also composers of later eras. Although attendance at these events was generally low, they were vitally important, not just for the theme of this year's festival, but to foster future generations of Bach lovers, performers and scholars. For their sake it would be good to see such events develop further in years to come.

The Bachfest displayed many faces to the public—from very dignified to truly relaxed. The most dignified was the presentation ceremony for the "City of Leipzig Bach Medal," which took place on Friday, June 8th in the very spacious and exquisitely decorated Altes Rathaus. This year's recipient was Masaaki Suzuki, who is about to bring to conclusion his recording series of the complete cantatas. On the following day he also performed the early version of Bach's St Matthew Passion. Equally dignified, and at the same time intellectually very stimulating, was the lecture by Christoph Wolff, held in the same venue on Saturday, June 9th. Wolff articulately illuminated the significance of Bach's 27 years of office in Leipzig within the 800-year-long musical tradition at

the St. Thomas School. Both events were brimming with enthusiastic audience members.

While the level of the concerts was generally high, there were few I would describe as truly memorable. The acoustic experience in historic venues such as the Nikolaikirche or Thomaskirche largely depends on where one is seated. It is easy to imagine the difficulties such an acoustically complex space can pose for the performers forced to make necessary adjustments during the limited time they have to rehearse. Still, as Ton Koopman and his Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra masterfully demonstrated in the Nikolaikirche on Saturday, June 9th, it was indeed possible to impress the sizeable audience, which responded ecstatically. Koopman's programme of BWV 1066, 51, 199 and 202 was colourfully enriched by the soprano Dorothee Miels, who sang with breathtaking brilliance, making the evening unforgettable. Another group that received a rapturous reception was Marcus Creed with his Vocalconsort Berlin, who performed a programme entitled 'Baroque Funeral Music' on Sunday, June 10th in the Thomaskirche. Featuring works by J. H. Schein, J. M. Bach, H. Schütz, J. Schelle, J. Crüger as well as two of J. S. Bach's own motets (BWV 227 and 229), it stimulated the imagination of the audience members as they experienced this broad historical overview of the *Thomaskantor's* artistic heritage.

Two English groups occupied what might be regarded as the most prominent slots in the Bachfest. The first was the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment led by Margaret Faultless, on Saturday, June 16th in the Nikolaikirche, with a performance of BWV 1067, BWV 1043, J. A. Hiller's F-major Sinfonia and Mozart's G-minor Symphony, KV 550. Having programmed the pieces more or less chronologically, they began with a small ensemble of one on a part, gradually increasing its size in response to both the style of the period and the scoring of the works. In this way they effectively demonstrated how orchestral works evolved in the 18th century, and at the same time created a cohesive programme with a momentous climax. However, despite the inspired

programming, their one-to-a-part rendition of Bach failed to carry sufficient power to impress the audience, and elicited little more than a tepid response.

The second English group was Harry Bicket with the English Concert and Concert Choir, which performed the B-minor Mass at the closing concert of the Bachfest on Sunday, June 17th. After an extra 10 minutes was spent on tuning the instruments, the opening tutti sounded over-articulated and did not seem to gel in the vast, reverberant space. The success of the choir's strategically gradated dynamics and phrasing in the fugal section of the opening "Kyrie," for instance, was soon met with disappointment in the following "Christe" by the distasteful vibrato-laden bel canto of the soloists. However, Bicket's thoughtful structuring of the Mass was credible, particularly in the shaping of the "Dona nobis pacem," which contrasted well with the "Gratias" heard 90 minutes earlier. There were some minor blemishes in every movement except in the "Agnus Dei." The countertenor Iestyn Davies was astonishing: he sang the work with such intensity and conviction that the audience was left breathless. I will remember it as one of the most gripping and convincing performances of the festival.

The last concert I will discuss here was Masaaki Suzuki's rendition of the early version (1727/29) of the St Matthew Passion (BWV 244b), performed on Friday June 8 in the Thomaskirche. A showcase concert of this year's Bach Medal winner, it was in many ways the most important performance of the Bachfest 2012. Numerous visitors flocked to hear the work in the venue in which it was originally conceived and performed, hoping to share in the acoustic message that would have been imparted on the audience who sat in the same location 285 years ago. However, contrary to high expectations, the performance appeared somewhat tentative and uninspired. I was dismayed to find that one or two soloists sang well below the level of professional performers. This was an utter surprise for someone who had heard the the same group perform the later (1736) version of the same work in Tokyo only two months ear-

lier. In Tokyo, Suzuki's rendition possessed an overwhelming sense of drama and conviction, which was enhanced by his soloists' technical brilliance. While such variables as the choice of performance venue and make-up of the ensemble may have influenced the way in which the performance was prepared and executed, it seemed that there were other fundamental issues associated with performing this unfamiliar early version of the work. Answering the question of how it ought to be performed and appreciated is not simple, as there will always be many unknowns.

A close look at the source situation shows us that the later version of the St. Matthew Passion has been preserved in a score that Bach wrote with meticulous care; the original performance parts also survive. The early version, by contrast, is primarily known through a distant manuscript copy in the hand of a certain Johann Christoph Farlau, who, according to Peter Wollny, may have copied it around 1765, presumably from a manuscript owned by Bach's student and son-in-law, Johann Christoph Altnickol. Given the tenuous connection to the composer, it is easy to imagine that Farlau's score—in addition to the early readings or those that Bach had originally conceived—contained a certain number of errors. Of course, Bach's early readings pose many crucial questions which are worth addressing. For example, why did he replace some movements in the later version? The final movement of Part 1, for example, was a simple four-part chorale "Jesum laß ich nicht von mir" and only later became the grand choral fantasia "O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß." Why did Bach change instruments in the later version? In No. 19, for example, transverse flutes were used instead of recorders and in Nos. 56-57 a lute was used instead of a viol. Finally, why did Bach add another continuo group in the later version? Just listening to the early version reveals what Bach himself clearly discerned 285 years ago. The lute used in No. 57 ("Komm, süßes Kreuz"), for instance, sounded as if it was a misjudgement on Bach's part. While the large melodic leaps in dotted rhythm are manageable on the lute, and more idiomatic than on the viol, the

Example 1: BWV 244b/49 (1727/29), opening

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quick flourishes were manifestly less so. On hearing this performance, one cannot help but wonder if Bach changed his mind after having heard his lutenist struggle with these passages.

Another question concerns the level of notational detail communicated in the sources. Recent studies have found that Bach was inclined to write fewer articulation marks, ornaments and embellishments in his composing scores, but more in his performance parts, his calligraphic autograph fair copies and published scores. The explanation for this state of affairs is presumably that more detail was required in materials that would have been used by musicians outside his immediate circle. What is worrying here is the disparity between what we have learned from the study of historical performance practice and what can be learned from the sources of these two versions. The opening of No. 49 (“Aus Liebe”) illustrates this point (See Examples 1 and 2 above).

Presumably the two versions would have been performed quite similarly in Bach’s time. The later version is simply more precise in its notation. In performing the early version in a modern concert, should one stick to what is written in the 1727/29 score, ignoring what is known about the rhythmic flexibility, variability of articulation, and the addition of cadential appoggiaturas in Bach’s time? The answer could be ‘yes’ if we are to regard a performance as the sonic manifestation of the score, rather than the sonic manifestation Bach most likely expected. For the most part, Suzuki’s Leipzig performance followed the former principle. Why? The artistic goals seem to follow a broader principle. Suzuki deliberately refrained from intervening in the inherent drama of the work, allowing the natural narrative of the Gospel story to carry the performance. There was no attempt by Suzuki’s Evangelist, Gerd Türk, to accentuate Peter’s weeping or Jesus’ death, thus

introducing a striking contrast with his rendition in Tokyo of the later version. One suspects that with his two Passion performances, Suzuki tried to distinguish between the degrees of maturity in Bach's dramatic language. In my view, however, performing the early version in a somewhat 'naive' manner is a mistake. Bach was not naive in 1727—indeed, he had already written nearly all of his cantatas by this point—and the attempt to contrast these two versions of the St. Matthew Passion in terms of levels of maturity strikes me as misguided. Masaaki Suzuki's performance nonetheless provided ample food for thought to both musicologists and performers who consider performing early versions of Bach's works, and he should be commended for his attempt to offer a new perspective on a familiar work.

The next Bachfest Leipzig, the theme of which will be "Vita Christi," will take place from June 14 to 23, 2013. I have no doubt that attending will offer many rewarding experiences.

Yo Tomita
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**REDEEMING THE ST. JOHN PASSION...
AND J. S. BACH**

BY ROBERT L. MARSHALL

I will remember the first time I heard Johann Sebastian Bach's Passion according to St. John. To say that the experience was deeply disturbing would be an understatement. It was nothing less than devastating. The music was, as expected, movingly expressive and beautiful, and breathtakingly complex in that inevitable, inexorable way that is Bach's alone. But it was also, thanks to its text, altogether painful for me to listen to.

Bach was then—as he has always been—the principal god in my personal pantheon. Like most American musicians of my generation, Jewish or not, my acquaintance with Bach was largely through his in-

strumental music: in my case the keyboard music. My familiarity with his church music was extremely limited. So I hadn't expected to encounter anything like the explicit, relentless, denunciation of the Jews—my own eternally suffering people, after all—that one is exposed to in that composition. Indeed there is nothing like it anywhere else in Bach's work—secular or sacred. And this was all being expressed in the German language, the sound of which to English speakers at the time was inextricably associated with ranting tyrants and demagogues and marauding SS troops. It was not difficult to imagine Goebels hollering "Die Juden aber schrienen...Weg, weg mit dem, kreuzige ihn!" ("But the Jews screamed... Away, away, with him. Crucify him!") The fact is, English speakers of my generation effectively never heard the German word "Juden" except when it was spoken—indeed, shouted—by a Nazi. I should add that this was all barely fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, when the psychic wounds were still very raw indeed.

And yet Bach's music in this stunning masterpiece, as just about everywhere else, was so profound and lovely—and so compelling.

All this by way of indicating that I completely understand why so many people—especially Jews, of course—have a "problem" (to put it mildly) with Johann Sebastian Bach's Passion according to St. John, and why many to this day are unable to listen to it, much less perform it.

Thank God—and you can take that figuratively or literally—the roughest edges have by now, fifty years hence, been smoothed to a great extent, if certainly not completely, and we have learned to put Bach's St. John Passion into historical, cultural, and theological perspective. Moreover, musical scholars and theologians are still working on that project.

In a word, the St. John Passion is without question Bach's most controversial work. In fact, it is really his only controversial work. All other controversies surrounding his music are concerned with the relatively trivial matters of authenticity and chronology. Did Bach really write a particular work and, if so,

when? Not many people outside the scholarly community really care about such things. Just about everyone cares, though, whether a towering work of art by one of the world's most famous creative geniuses is conveying a doctrine of murderous hatred, or depicting dehumanizing stereotypes.

The matter is still so sensitive that for the past decade or so it has been the rule more than the exception in this country to attach a “warning label” of sorts to any live performance of the St. John Passion (as if dealing with some hazardous material), either in the form of a full-scale symposium, or in the form of a pre-concert lecture.

One could, of course, try to excuse, or at least relativize the problem by pointing out that anti-Semitic, or at least anti-Jewish, stereotypes have long been part of the Western cultural tradition. The St. John Passion is the musical counterpart of *The Merchant of Venice*. And the anti-Semitic caricatures or utterances in the works of Dostoyevsky, Dickens, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound et al ad nauseam, are familiar to us all. The arguments for the prosecution and for the defense have been presented for them all. Our contemporaries—as individuals—have rendered their several verdicts.

But consider for a moment Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Unless I'm deceived, the play has become ever more popular in recent years, with ever more stage and even film productions. Clever directors have succeeded in finding layers of nuance and complexity in what at first encounter seems to be, in the figure of Shylock, a merciless anti-Semitic caricature. (In fact, it is becoming difficult to recall a time now when Shylock was routinely depicted as the villain rather than as the victim of the piece.) Over the same period, though, performances of Bach's St. John Passion are undertaken, if at all, with, at the least, considerable trepidation. Upon reflection, the different attitudes on the part of modern audiences toward the two challenging masterpieces are readily accounted for. *The Merchant of Venice* is a work of the imagination: Shylock nothing but a single, grotesque, and fictional individual. The Gospel ac-

ording to St. John, in starkest contrast, purports to be factual: conveying historical truth; and the Jews in it—whether they are taken to represent just the “authorities” or the entire Jewish people—are more than a single repellent individual, and they stand accused and convicted of the worst imaginable crime of all: deicide—the murder of a god.

But there is, nonetheless, a great irony in the strikingly dissimilar reception of both works in contemporary cultural life, and it is this: Unlike Shakespeare, Dickens, Dostoyevsky and those other troubling geniuses who willingly contributed to the West's anti-Semitic cultural tradition, Bach was clearly not the author of the text of the St. John Gospel. By virtue of his position as Director of Music for the orthodox Lutheran church of Leipzig and, according to the guidelines established by the clerical authorities, he was obliged to set verbatim the holy biblical text of the Passion story—the word of God as translated by Martin Luther, the founder of his Protestant faith—for the Good Friday religious service.

At this point it is advisable to review briefly some of the history that forms the cultural and religious contexts for Bach's St. John Passion. Like virtually all of his astounding legacy, Bach's great Passion settings represent a synthesis of musical styles and traditions. On the one hand, they are descended from a long medieval liturgical tradition, in which the Gospel readings of the Passion story during Holy Week were presented as sung dramatizations: the narrator, i. e., the Evangelist, was joined by solo singers taking on the roles of Jesus, Pilate, and other personae, while a chorus took on the role of the crowds (of soldiers, priests, the mob). Since the Lutheran Reformation these so-called “responsorial Passions” were sung in German rather than Latin, and by the 17th century, the pure Gospel text was augmented by the addition of appropriate congregational hymns (chorales) that meditated on the larger meaning of the biblical events.

But Bach's Passions also built on a considerably more recent innovation, one developed in fact just in the twenty or so years before he composed the

St. John Passion in 1724. Known as “Passion Oratorios,” these compositions were an offshoot of the latest developments in secular musical drama and theater. They were non-liturgical works, consisting of rhymed verses instead of the Gospel text and set to music in the style of the recitatives and arias of contemporary Italian opera.

The North German city of Hamburg was at the center of this development. The libretto for the first true Passion Oratorio of this kind, *Der blutige und sterbende Jesus* (“The Bloody and Dying Jesus”), dating to 1704, was by Christian Friedrich Hunold (1681–1721, pen name: Menantes). The most significant and influential Passion Oratorio text, however, was by Barthold Heinrich Brockes. His libretto, *Der für die Sünde der Welt gemarterte und sterbende Jesus* (“Jesus, Martyred for the Sins of the World”), published in 1712, became enormously popular and influential, and was eventually set to music by almost a dozen composers—Telemann and Handel among them.

It is important to understand that this development in Hamburg was actually an early symptom of Enlightenment thinking and indeed of incipient religious tolerance. Although the clergy, the clerical authorities, objected to the substitution of a modern paraphrase for the biblical narrative, the secular establishment—the Hamburg Senate—was concerned above all that the new texts not incite religious animosity. In a remarkable document dated 14 April 1710—that is, two years before the publication of Brockes’s oratorio text and unquestionably known to him—the Senate, explicitly invoking the name and authority of Martin Luther (and paraphrasing the Reformer’s own “Meditation on Christ’s Passion” of 1519), issued this stern injunction: “Our blessed Luther... emphatically indicates that the right and proper goal of the reflection on the Passion must be aimed at the awakening of true penitence... and of a life pleasing to God. *The other things, such as violent invectives and exclamations against Pilate, Judas, the Jews (especially when entire sections are filled with them) can by no means be tolerated.*” (Emphasis added. My thanks to Robin Leaver and Michael Marissen

for bringing the Luther source to my attention.) To my knowledge this extraordinary document has never been mentioned in previous discussions of the St. John Passion controversy, even though a substantial excerpt, in English translation, has been “hiding in plain sight,” as it were, in Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio, Volume 2: The Oratorio in the Baroque Era: Protestant Germany and England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 110. One wonders whether its neglect can at all be attributed to the fact that it does not fit the preferred contemporary narrative of the early eighteenth-century Passion Oratorio tradition—including Bach’s settings—as anti-Judaic or anti-Semitic works.

Now some have argued that the Brockes text is in fact virulently anti-Semitic. But I have to say that I fail to see this. For all its graphic, bloody, Baroque imagery, the Jews are never mentioned explicitly except as part of the phrase “King of the Jews” or as part of the caption “Chorus of Jews” found only in the libretto. Christ’s tormenters are characterized as sinners, murderers, henchmen, devils, as “a furious brood of vipers” but also as simply “they.”

At all events, in 1717 a successful performance of Telemann’s setting of the Brockes Passion in Leipzig persuaded the conservative church authorities there to permit such “theatrical” treatments of the story in the city’s main churches—namely, St. Thomas and St. Nicholas—so long as they retained the biblical texts rather than newly-minted rhymed versions of them. By 1721 Bach’s predecessor as Thomas Cantor, Johann Kuhnau, inaugurated an annual Good Friday tradition with a performance of his Passion according to St. Mark during the Vesper service in the Thomaskirche. Henceforth, Passion performances were to alternate regularly from year to year between the Thomas and Nicholas churches (and also, presumably, to present settings of the four gospels in some sort of rotation).

That, then, in brief, is the background for Bach’s composition. The narrative framework for the work is provided by Martin Luther’s translation of Chapters 18 and 19 of the Gospel according to St.

John. Following tradition—and the explicit Leipzig prescription—it is presented verbatim (not in paraphrase) but in dramatized form. A tenor, in the role of the Evangelist, narrates the events while a bass takes on the role of Jesus. Other solo voices represent Peter, Pilate, and some of the lesser characters. In the crowd scenes the chorus plays the protagonists—variously representing the High Priests, the mob, or the soldiers. In these so-called “turba” (or crowd) choruses Bach draws on the full spectrum of choral techniques from incisive chordal outbursts to free polyphony to formal fugal expositions.

For the modern listener it is precisely the crowd choruses—and surely they alone—that are the locus of the distress. The sticking point is the fact that the St. John Gospel specifically and repeatedly identifies those hysterically crying out for the death of Jesus as “the Jews.” The St. Matthew Gospel, in contrast, does not use the “J” word in this context at all: it consistently refers to the crowd simply as “the people” (in Luther’s translation: “Das Volk”). In all three synoptic Gospels, in fact, the word “Jews” occurs almost exclusively as part of the formulation “King of the Jews.”

Some modern theologians have argued that the rhetoric in John’s Gospel—the last of the four to be set down—reflects conflicts among traditional and early Christianized Jewish communities in the period following the destruction of the Temple, and that John—himself a Jew (like all the disciples, and indeed like Jesus)—was directing his resentment toward the religious establishment, i. e. “the Jews.” Others maintain that John’s target encompassed all those who rejected Jesus and refused to follow him (that is, not only those who had official status)—in short, once again, “the Jews.” The obvious implication is that the problem is with John’s choice of words, specifically the Greek formulation “hoi Ioudaioi” and, following it, in Luther’s translation, “die Juden,” i. e., the Jews. The Greek expression, however, could also have been translated as “the Judeans,” i. e., the residents of the province of Judea. For example, in St. Luke’s narrative of the Nativity (2:4), Luther

writes that Joseph left Nazareth and entered “in das jüdische Land zur Stadt Davids...Bethlehem.” The German “das jüdische Land” would most readily be translated into English as “the Jewish territory” or “the land of the Jews.” In the King James Version, however, the passage reads “Joseph went into Judaea, unto the city of David.”

But there is no gainsaying the fact that all the standard English translations, and, I suspect, the standard translations in just about all the modern languages, render St. John’s Greek in the Passion narrative as the equivalent of “the Jews.”

So the biblical, theological, and linguistic problems, along with the modern moral problem, persist. Not surprisingly, modern theologians continue to grapple with them. I am indebted to Dr. Martin Rumscheidt, a theologian and a good friend, for calling my attention to a new German translation of the Bible prepared by a consortium of German Scripture scholars that aims to rectify these and other troubling passages in the Lutheran Bible. The publication, which appeared in 2006, bears the title *Die Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (“The Bible in just, or fair, language”).

In this version we find several different renderings for Luther’s “die Juden”—most typically “die jüdische Obrigkeit” (i.e. the Jewish authorities).

Dr. Rumscheidt suggests, in a private correspondence “that what the [compilers of the new text] are after is to make it completely clear that the ‘writer’ of John does not accuse the entire Jewish population present in Jerusalem at the Passover time of having [wanted] Jesus killed but only the “Obrigkeit”—that is, the religious authorities—who were in fact the real ‘government’ in the Roman province of Judea (rather than King Herod)—[and] who wanted to have Jesus out of the way for fear that he could upset the delicate arrangements between Rome and themselves. All of the scholars involved in the... translation maintain that the ‘writer’ of John was a Jew and not a Gentile and had, like the whole Jesus movement at the time, little use for the ‘Obrigkeit’.” Rumscheidt goes on as follows: “I would claim therefore

that the so-called anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism of the Gospel of John is a later interpolation on the Gospel by people who were anti-Semitic and anti-Judaistic like John Chrysostom of Constantinople.” With the mention of John Chrysostom of Constantinople I am in over my head. Others can judge better than I whether something like the new German translation and whether modern theological explanations like that of Dr. Rumscheidt suffice to “redeem,” as it were, and make palatable, if not the whole can of worms, at least some of the most disturbing passages in the St. John Gospel.

As for the St. John Passion: Let me suggest that Bach is able to redeem the work himself—and has done so triumphantly—without the help of modern theological revisionism. He has done so by means of the texts of the remaining two-thirds of the work and their extraordinary settings.

As is well known, the text for the St. John Passion, like that for the St. Matthew and Bach’s other large-scale oratorios, draws on three sources. In addition to the Bible chapters, they are the repertory of traditional congregational hymns, as well as modern poetic verses. While the Gospel narrative relates the historical events, the congregational chorales convey the church’s understanding of them; the poetic verses, for their part—set mostly as elaborate arias—express the emotional responses of the individual believer to them. Put another way: the Bible text describes what took place in the historical past; the arias capture the present moment by giving voice to the emotional and spiritual experiences of the contemporary, individual, believer (“contemporary” no matter whether to Bach’s time or today), as that individual believer reflects upon those powerful, if distant, events. The chorales, finally, like a Greek chorus, assume a more reflective, timeless, perspective, namely, that of the Christian community as a whole—in a word: that of the church.

It is important to realize that in Bach’s time all these roles and points of view were entrusted to the same performers. The *dramatis personae* of the biblical story, the participants in the meditative chorales, and the

soloists in the arias were all members of Bach’s chorus. Every singer was called upon to empathize with, to portray, and to enact a number of these roles in the course of the performance. The same bass who sang the role of Jesus in one recitative was part of the crowd calling for His blood in another. In short, the singers were all variously believers, disciples, Romans, Jews—victims, tormenters, the damned, the blessed.

Whereas Bach could do nothing about the Gospel text, we can be sure that he played a major role—very likely the decisive role—in the selection of the other texts of the St. John Passion. And what messages do they convey? Here is an outline of their contents. They counsel compassion, empathy, and gratitude for the Savior’s suffering (which He endured, after all, only on our behalf); also a resolve to follow him and at least to try to emulate His mercy, to weep and mourn for, but also to rejoice in, His sacrifice: the act that brings everlasting life. But these texts go on to counsel not only awareness of Christ’s innocence and sacrifice but also of one’s own sins, and an understanding that it is one’s own sins—and (by clear implication) not just those of some Jewish zealots who lived in the Middle East centuries ago—an understanding, I repeat, that it is one’s own sins that are responsible for Christ’s suffering. Paul Gerhardt’s chorale asks “Wer hat dich so geschlagen?” (“Who has struck you thus?”) and answers “Ich, ich und meine Sünden... die haben dir erregt [d]as Elend, das dich schlägt?” (“I, I and my sins...these have brought you [t]his misery that assails you.)

Just below the surface, I suspect, of all this modern controversy and hand-wringing is one particularly fraught and disquieting question, namely, what, if anything at all, does the mere existence of such a work as the St. John Passion reveal of Bach’s personal attitude toward the Jews? The short answer, really, is: nothing. But let’s pursue the point a bit further. I believe a case can be made that Bach, if anything, was unusually tolerant of other religions for someone of his time and place and situation. For example, his employer in Köthen was a Calvinist.

Bach's relationship with Prince Leopold of Köthen was exceptionally warm—almost brotherly, it seems to me. Bach later described his years at the Calvinist court of Köthen as the happiest of his life. We can also point to the composer's repeated efforts to ingratiate himself with the Catholic Court at Dresden. These efforts famously included his offer to provide music for the church service there—an offer that he reinforced by sending to King Frederick Augustus II of Saxony, as a modest display of his earnestness (and of his ability), a handsome dedication copy of the B minor Mass—a work that was later referred to in the Bach family as “the great Catholic Mass.” It's striking, in fact, that Bach's relations with both the Calvinist prince during his Köthen years and the Catholic Court in nearby Dresden during his Leipzig years were considerably better than those with any of his Lutheran employers (the “Obrigkeit,” we might say)—co-religionists all—whether in Arnstadt, Mühlhausen, Weimar, or Leipzig.

As for the Jews: literally nothing definitive is known about Bach's personal relations with Jews. It is not even known whether Bach had ever had any personal contact with Jews at all, since—with few exceptions—they were generally banned from living in Leipzig—or indeed in the regions of Thuringia and Saxony where Bach spent almost the entirety of his life. They could and did, however, visit the Leipzig trade fairs, and Bach may have met Jews on those occasions. There has also been speculation that Johann Abraham Birnbaum, the university professor of rhetoric, and Bach's friend, who published a famous defense of Bach's music in the 1730s, may have been a Jewish convert.

But far more important is the evidence provided by the numerous underlinings and marginal comments in Bach's personal copy of a massive annotated edition of the Bible known, after the name of the editor, as the “Calov Bible.” It is striking that the composer completely ignores those passages that can be read as hostile to the Jews. On the contrary: the only remark in the volume specifically concerning the Jews that Bach was inclined to mark at all was a

fairly favorable one in the book of Ecclesiastes. The annotator observes: “The writings of the Jews differ from those of the Gentiles in that the Jews have received God's word and commandments and that they teach us through their writings that everything proceeds according to God's will and order, and for that reason these writings are all the more useful to read.”

It is easy to conclude, moreover, from Bach's marginalia that the biblical figure whom the composer most revered (next to Christ, of course), and the one with whom he most identified, was very much a Jew: none other than King David, the legendary author of the Book of Psalms.

Specifically, Bach annotated no fewer than three passages in the two books of Chronicles, which narrate the life of King David. 1 Chronicles 25 describes the musical forces provided by David for the divine service. Bach writes: “NB: This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing church music.” At 1 Chronicles 28:21, commenting on David's injunction to Solomon “to use every willing man who has skill for any kind of service, Bach observes: “NB: Marvelous proof that, along with other parts of the divine service, music, too (and especially), was ordained by God's spirit through David.” Finally, Bach entered the following remark at 2 Chronicles 5:13-14 describing the use of musical instruments to praise the Lord: “NB: Wherever there is devotional music God, with His grace, is ever present.”

These three observations, incidentally, make up fully half of the grand total of just six verbal comments—as opposed to the numerous underlinings or strokes in the margins—that Bach bothered to enter into the Calov tomes.

And in this connection I think it is of more than passing interest that Bach launches his monumental setting of the Passion according to St. John with what? Not some newly invented modern poetic verses penned by his librettist, as he does the St. Matthew Passion. Nor has Bach chosen to take some appropriate chorale text or a passage from the New Testament. The St. John Passion begins rather with

lines taken almost (but not quite) verbatim from the Psalms of David, specifically from the opening of Psalm 8. (The text of Bach's chorus: "Herr, unser Herrscher, dessen Ruhm in allen Landen herrlich ist!" Luther's rendering of the corresponding lines of Psalm 8 reads: "Herr, unser Herrscher, wie herrlich ist dein Name in allen Landen." This is given in the King James Version as: "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth.")

Now, in addition to serving important theological purposes—namely, that of emphasizing Jesus' divine nature from the outset—it seems to me that this Psalm citation does something more. It constitutes an implicit homage to King David, someone who for Bach was not only a biblical hero but a fellow musician whose conviction that music was an indispensable adornment of the divine service enriched and justified Bach's own calling.

Moreover, with this prominent reference to the Book of Psalms on the most somber day and, certainly in Leipzig, the musical climax of the church year—Bach's first year as Thomaskantor—the composer was perhaps revealing his interest in shaping the sacred music he had produced so far during that inaugural year into a coherent cycle of sorts. For he had introduced himself to the Leipzig congregations of the St. Thomas and St. Nicholas churches just ten months earlier, on successive Sundays in the two churches, with a pair of ambitious cantatas (Cantatas 75 and 76) that, like the St. John Passion, open with elaborate choral settings of texts from the Book of Psalms.

To summarize, and to belabor the obvious: The Passion According to St. John gives voice to some of the loftiest sentiments of the human spirit. It does so through the medium of some of the most profound, expressive, and beautiful music, ever conceived by the mind of man. Neither that supreme masterpiece nor its incomparable maker—one Johann Sebastian Bach—needs any apology.

Postscript:

The foregoing text was delivered, with minor changes, on March 10, 2012, in Sanders Theater, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, preceding a performance of J. S. Bach's St. John Passion by the Back Bay Chorale, Scott Allen Jarrett conducting

It turned out, much to my surprise, that the Jewish and Gentile members of the audience who cared to express their views after this talk had completely different responses to it.

For the most part Christians reported that they barely registered the negative depiction of the Jews in the St. John narrative. Many apparently were not even aware that there was a "problem." They seemed to regard it, along with the depiction of the Romans, Pilate, the High Priests, etc., almost as a background story. That is, they did not seem much (if at all) inclined to connect this historical account of events that happened centuries ago with present-day Jews. The Christians' focus, they assured me, when they hear or perform the Passion, is on the message that Jesus was crucified for the salvation of all mankind: that we are all guilty of it, that we all should be thankful for it and rejoice in it.

In starkest contrast, the Jewish members of the audience who were moved to voice their opinion confessed that they have difficulty noticing anything in the St. John Passion other than the harsh portrayal of the Jews. They were grateful, they said, that I owned up to having had a similar experience.

Needless to say, others lecturing on the St. John Passion may have had different reactions.

Robert L. Marshall
Brandeis University (Emeritus)

RESULTS OF THE 2012 BIENNIAL BACH VOCAL COMPETITION

Dashon Burton, bass-baritone from New Haven, Connecticut, was awarded first prize in the Seventh Biennial **Bach Vocal Competition** for Young American Singers, co-sponsored by the American Bach Society and the Bach Choir of Bethlehem, PA. Mr. Burton is a native of Bronx, NY, who has been praised for his “enormous, thrilling voice seemingly capable... [of] raising the dead;” and “nobility and rich tone,” (New York Times). He studied at Case Western Reserve University, Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, and Yale University’s Institute of Sacred Music. Recent collaborators include Pierre Boulez, Masaaki Suzuki, Steven Smith, and Greg Funfgeld. The first prize comes with a cash award of \$3000. The ten finalists were selected from more than 70 applicants nation-wide who submitted audition tapes. Applicants, who must be 30 years or younger, were screened by David Gordon, education director, vocal coordinator and master class director of the Carmel Bach Festival in California. Each finalist performed two Bach arias of his/her choice. The five judges included Mary Greer, president of the American Bach Society; Greg Funfgeld, artistic director and conductor of The Bach Choir of Bethlehem; and Bethlehem Bach Festival soloists Rosa Lamoreaux, soprano; Benjamin Butterfield, tenor; and William Sharp, bass-baritone. Honorable mention as well as cash prizes of \$500 were awarded to **Steven Brennfleck**, tenor, from Ewing, NJ; **Sarah Mesko**, mezzo-soprano, from Washington, DC; and **Jonathan Woody**, bass-baritone from Brooklyn, NY. Congratulations to all who participated in the finals.

NEWS FROM MEMBERS

Don Freund would like to announce the release of his recording of the **Well-Tempered Clavier Book 1** on Parma Recordings. Subtitled “A Composer’s Approach,” Freund attempts to develop a composer-centric interpretation of the complete Book 1 at the piano. The two-disc set is accompanied by a third disc, a video series of lessons that provide deeper insight into the master’s process of composition and Freund’s approach. For more information please visit www.parmarecordings.com.

Timothy A. Smith, Professor of Music Theory at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, would like to invite ABS members to visit his project, **Exploring J. S. Bach’s Goldberg Variations** at digitalbach.com/goldberg. This is the second phase of the Oregon Bach Festival’s Digital Bach Project, which represents a collaboration between Northern Arizona University, the University of Oregon, Oregon Bach Festival, Hänssler Classic, and the Hinkle Charitable Foundation. The browsing/gaming approach adopted here is intended to stimulate curiosity and promote exploration. The object is to develop new audiences for Bach’s music by presenting interesting pedagogical material, including animations of the nine canons of BWV 988 as well as Bach’s fourteen-canon addendum (BWV 1087). The site features complete performances on harpsichord (Matthew Halls) and piano (David Korevaar), synchronized with a 1741 copy of the score once owned by Johann Nikolaus Forkel. Please visit oregonbachfestival.com and follow the link to Digital Bach Project for more information.

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Founded in 1972 as a chapter of the Neue Bach-Gesellschaft, the American Bach Society is dedicated to promoting the study and performance of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Annual dues are \$50 (\$25 for students). Membership information and application materials are available online at www.americanbachsociety.org. Interested persons may also contact Reginald L. Sanders, Kenyon College Music Department, Storer Hall, Gambier, OH 43022, USA, or sandersr@kenyon.edu.

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