

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# Bach's Passion Revealed

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Imagine how different the history of music might have been had Bach been interested in opera. Suppose that instead of heading to Leipzig, Germany, in 1723 to become the cantor at the St. Thomas Church, he had settled in Dresden, where audiences had an insatiable passion for Italian opera.

But Bach had a higher calling: composing music for the church. In a letter to the Leipzig town electors he promised church music that "shall not last too long" and "shall be of such a nature as not to make an operatic impression, but rather incite the listeners to devotion."

Well, Bach did not entirely adhere to those goals in two of his colossal masterpieces, the "St. John Passion" and the "St. Matthew Passion." Neither is remotely an opera. Instead, the story of Jesus' crucifixion is mostly told by the Evangelist, and the narrative is regularly interrupted with timeouts for ruminative arias and reflective chorales.

Still, these scores abound with such visceral drama and operatic sweep that directors have periodically been tempted to stage them. Complete productions with costumes and scenery never succeed. But for the "St. Matthew Passion," the director Jonathan Miller, aided by the conductor Paul Goodwin, found a halfway approach. Mr. Miller dressed the chorus and orchestra members in everyday modern clothing and placed them in a circle so that they could face each other and enact the story while they performed it.

When presented at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1997 and 2001, Mr. Miller's staging of the "St. Matthew" proved a revelation. It returned on Saturday night in a singable English translation based on Robert Shaw's, with Mr. Goodwin conducting.

For contrast, on April 4 at St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue, Bach lovers had a chance to hear the "St. John Passion" presented much the way the composer had intended: performed as a sacred work by the church's renowned choir of men and boys, with strong soloists and a fine ensemble of period-instrument players, Concert Royal. John Scott, the organist and director of music at St. Thomas, conducted.

Just hearing these two works within five days - the "St. Matthew" so noble and severe, the "St. John" more volatile and graphic - was privilege enough. The opportunity to compare these very different approaches was another enticement.

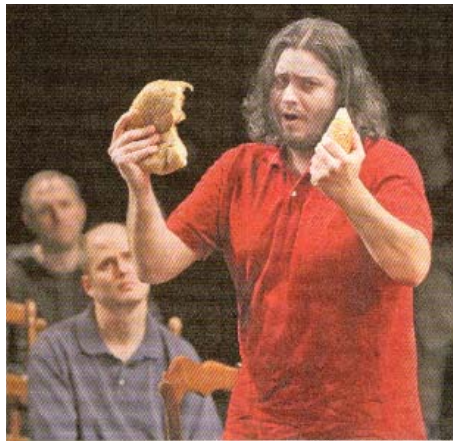
With inspired theatrical instincts, Bach gave the chorus in each passion multiple roles to play. They are Jesus' disciples and also the priests who call for his crucifixion; they portray the Jewish elders

as well as baffled onlookers in Jerusalem. Most moving, the chorus members also become penitent souls in the present, reflecting on the mystery of Jesus' life.

In his staging of the "St. Matthew," Mr. Miller takes Bach's concept of multiple roles for the chorus seriously and makes it startlingly real. The musicians and choristers, arrayed in jeans, slacks and sweaters, are encircled by the audience, breaking down the divide between participants and witnesses.

Though the staging is minimal, the effect created is riveting. The Evangelist, here the plaintive tenor Rufus Müller, sits at a long wooden table with a loaf of bread and a tumbler of wine readied for the enactment of the Last Supper. From his first wistful phrases, he proved an involving and trustworthy storyteller.

The dramatic conflicts are made more gripping right from the opening chorus. Half of the choristers almost frantically implore their brethren to come and mourn Jesus: "See Him! The Bridegroom see! A Lamb is He." The other choristers, looking confused, rustle in their seats and shout back, almost annoyed: "Whom? How? What?"



bass Curtis Streetman as Jesus in Sir Jonathan Miller's production of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" at The Brooklyn Academy of Music

Jesus, as affectingly sung by the bass Curtis Streetman, is a husky, shaggy-haired, intense young man in black jeans, sneakers and a blood-red shirt. In some of his most pitiable moments, Mr. Streetman simply reacts and listens, as in the sublime aria for tenor and chorus when Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane while his disciples (the other half of the chorus) slumber in their chairs.

In another unforgettable moment, Joshua South, a wholesome-looking young bass from the chorus taking the small role of the disciple Peter, having

denied his savior three times, slumps in a chair, cradling his head in his hands, grief-stricken and ashamed. As he silently weeps, the countertenor Daniel Taylor, hovering over him, sings a comforting aria. Nearby, Jesus looks on, his body slouched in sadness.

The staging would not be so effective if the musical performance were not so dynamic. To be free to act, the vocal soloists and chorus perform this long and complex work from memory, a feat in itself. The baritone Stephen Varcoe, the soprano Suzie LeBlanc, the tenor Nils Brown and, especially, the rich-voiced mezzo-soprano Krisztina Szabo were the other rewarding soloists. Mr. Goodwin drew an urgent and sensitive performance from the excellent orchestra.

Though the concert presentation of the "St. John Passion" at St. Thomas Church was in every way traditional, it had a different kind of searing impact because of the integrity and beauty of the performance. Inevitably, musical details were blurred by the reverberant acoustics of the spacious church. But Mr. Scott turned this to advantage. In the opening chorus, as the strings churned out Bach's undulant 16th-note figures, the sound was like an ominous murmur starting in the distance and creeping steadily closer, until the chorus burst forth with the cries of "Herr! Herr!" and pleaded with the Lord to "show us your Passion."

The St. Thomas Choir, with 24 boys and 15 men, was remarkable. The well-trained boys from the choir school dispatched Bach's ornate and wayward vocal lines with utter confidence and radiantly pure sound. It was somewhat frightening to see little children portraying the avenging crowd shouting to Pilate that Jesus is an "evildoer."

The tenor Mark Bleeke as the Evangelist and the bass Craig Phillips as Jesus gave elegant yet impetuous performances. The soprano Julianne Baird was a standout among the able soloists. There was no sense of an interpretive agenda in Mr. Scott's conducting.

Everything was direct, expressive and clear. He took an almost grammatical approach in the chorales, shaping phrases so that the sense of the German texts came first.

In his Passions Bach found a way to compose stunning musical dramas while steering clear of opera. Still, it is fascinating to wonder what he might have done. After all, he could have taught Bellini a thing or two about how to write a long-spun melody for the voice. And in the handling of crowd scenes, Verdi could not top Bach for operatic punch.