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Peter Sellars on Bach's „St. Matthew Passion”

Imagine the first followers, broken and bereft the night after the crucifixion. They have taken Jesus' bruised, mutilated body down from the cross and buried it in the earth, and with it their hopes for a world revolution. Were all the healings, the changed lives, the words that burned in their hearts and liberated their minds an illusion? Their last days have been a blur. After a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with huge rallies and adoring crowds, their leader was executed in public like a common criminal following a sham trial by a discredited government. The last handful of dirt is placed on the grave and a group of shattered people sit on the ground at twilight and ask themselves, how could this happen? How could everything go so wrong? There is no such thing as Christianity yet. There is no church, there are no gospels. There are just fresh memories of inspired and difficult words – “blessed are they that mourn, blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you...” And the questions loom. How could everything have gone so wrong?

Johann Sebastian Bach wrote his masterpiece, the *St. Matthew Passion*, not as a concert work, and not as a work of theater, but as a transformative ritual reaching across time and space, uniting disparate, and dispirited communities. Bach's project is to take a community through a grieving process. That process includes remembering the departed, an expression of love for the departed, recognizing what is gone with the person who is no longer with us, and also beginning to recognize what remains. That which remains, as it is remembered, claimed, understood, and finally embodied, forms the fabric of our lives and connects each courageous and illuminated footstep we take to a moral and spiritual power which threads throughout history. That which has disappeared grows stronger and more present each day in new and renewed life choices that we make as acts of remembrance.

Bach's achievement is one of the most powerful acts of remembrance in human history. Bach insists that it is not enough to be retrospectively mindful. He wants to help us move forward, and he has created dynamic musical forms that activate and deepen our commitment, and that support us in the first steps on a new path. I am saying “our” because in Bach's *Matthew Passion* structure there are no spectators, there are no auditors, there are only participants. We are all present as witnesses, all called upon to testify, we all must ask ourselves difficult questions, place ourselves in others' shoes, and come back to our own lives with new purpose, awareness and determination. Bach's structure is radically inclusive. He works through narrative, meditation, personal introspection and collective crisis. Our own internal conflicts are exposed as the larger contradictions of the world, and our gradually expanding levels of personal and collective recognition lead to an expanded sense of personal and collective responsibility. The sheer scale of the work tests our endurance and becomes an overwhelming exercise in compassion.

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Bach originally created the *Matthew Passion* in two halves on either side of the sermon in the Good Friday service. Nobody was going anywhere; the day was reserved for searching, lament, and the shame and outrage that the Passion story evoke – the burning sense of injustice, and our own sense of participation in the perpetuation of that injustice in small and large ways every day of our lives. Good Friday was the most important “pause button” of the year.

The St. Matthew Passion begins with a wake-up call that comes to us across eternity. Chorus I, the disciples and people of Jesus’ time call to Chorus II, the people of our time, with the repeated command to “See!” The people of our time are numb with grief, alienation and despair and are only capable of single syllable responses. “Where?” “How?” We are lost. Bach repeats the command to see, finally letting it flower in a series of inspired melismas, and while the children’s chorus sings overhead about patience, seeing becomes vision.

We are asked to see our guilt. When Bach speaks of “guilt” or “*schuld*,” he is not referring to the paralytic state of self-pity, excuses, denial and procrastination that we have come to associate with that word. What he means, repeating and intensifying the word five times, is self-examination – the acknowledgment that by drying our tears and finally seeing clearly we are inevitably led to recognize our own responsibility, to accept responsibility, and by taking responsibility, to act. We are empowered and moved to change our lives, to make sacrifices, and to deepen our love and our patience (the chorus repeats the word “patience” twelve times!). And all of that will ultimately move the world. And that is just the *St. Matthew Passion’s* opening double chorus!

The ritual “staging” for these performances is primarily focused on Bach’s spatial imagination and the moral energies that his dialogues and juxtapositions release. Bach’s musical images are often vividly pictorial, but they also move beyond the visual, passing through the tactile, to find their redemptive and healing power in the act of making music itself, which is its own kind of spiritual path of concentration, shared attention, shared affection, and transcendent achievement.

Bach represents the universe in this piece with 360° of cosmic forces – two orchestras face each other, two choruses face each other, with the hovering high altitude aerial presence of children singing on behalf of the unborn. Bach’s form *par excellence* for metaphysical inquiry is dialogue, and he begins with a spectacular image of the divided self, our divided selves, distance and separation calling across a void. We are of two minds, and out of sync with ourselves. But with the chorales, which embody the process of realization that somebody else’s story is in fact our own, Bach holds out the promise of unison on the way to unity. Bach’s plan of narrative, call and response is interrupted by spontaneous moments of inspired individual breakthrough, and shocking moments of collective impulse followed by second thoughts and complete reversals.

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The same chorus that crucifies Jesus wants to stop the travesty of justice, to honor him, and to cradle his broken body in their laps. The same people who wanted to save Jesus failed to help him, and for Bach, the turning point of the piece is Jesus' arrest, when even Jesus' closest friends and most devoted supporters, his disciples, run away. We spend a lot of our lives running away. Bach has written the chorales for all of us who ran away and are still running. The first gesture is to stop running. To stop. And then to look back. We begin by recognizing what we failed to do. But Jesus is waiting for us! The understanding of failure is pointedly not meant by Bach to lead to self-loathing and suicide, but on the contrary, to more deeply motivate our need to finally do what we failed to do, but this time with interest – with love, with grace, and with joy. Each chorale charts the passage from the self that is “dead to the world” towards a new, unexpected gift of life. We taste the freedom and poise that comes from self-knowledge and a re-ignited positive desire to create meaningful change that is exactly rooted in everything that we are not proud of in our lives. We access a second wind, we are given a second chance, we find a new courage (or our old courage), and this time we put our life on the line, we move to intervene and to stop the wrongful arrest, jailing, and death sentence of our private hopes, our dreams, and our friends.

Bach's vocal soloists take arduous journeys through winding, twisted, extreme vocal lines, encountering obstacles, hesitating, starting again, trying another way, gathering force, repeating, reinforcing, losing, and finally gaining the repose that they have been searching for which was awaiting them all along in their own hearts. (The *da capo* aria both symbolizes and represents that perfect circle; the nearly *da capo* aria insists that life is an astonishing improvisation in which events never repeat exactly.) This painful and exalted journey is necessary and dangerous and revelatory for every human being, and Bach knows that no one can make it alone. Bach offers each exposed and vulnerable soloist extraordinary companions for the road – courageous instrumentalists who match the vocalists in daring, intensity, and tenderness, offering radiant examples of sustained compassion.

The arias repeat a small group of words over and over until they seep into the soul -- moving from hope to doubt to desire to affirmation, holding on, not letting go, until the moment of crisis becomes a moment of grace. Like a prayer, we need to repeat not just the words themselves but to go inside the words, to break the surface, to taste the meaning and surrender that lie on the other side of the words, and let the words themselves dissolve into a new reality, the actualization of an inner vision. This meditation is how healing comes into the world through sound.

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The alto part evokes Mary Magdalene, and the soprano one of her sisters in grief at the foot of the sepulcher. Bach continued the High German Baroque tradition of braiding the Biblical Song of Songs into the Passion story. The Song of Songs is perhaps the most controversial book in the Bible in that much of it is written in a woman's voice and its frank declaration of love in joyous nubile bodies takes the transcendent love and yearning of the soul to a very physical place; this is real love, a love story, erotically charged with spiritual energy – "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." These passionate encounters suffuse Bach's music and the images of the bride welcoming the bridegroom and the ecstatic love between Jesus and the soul recur in many of Bach's cantatas.

Jesus Christ means "Jesus the Anointed." Bach's alto is the woman who anointed Jesus with her tears mingled with the oil of gladness, the ineffable fragrance of longing from the heart of hearts. Bach evokes the spiritual aroma, the perfume of hidden hope and unspoken desire, with two flutes wafting an invisible fragrance into the heavens. This is an ancient healing ceremony. A woman with healing in her hands touches Jesus and brings his wounded soul back to life. In this sublime music, the sense of touch, infused with the heartbreak of a lover who cannot bear to lose her beloved, becomes Bach's gentle image of sweetness being made from life's most bitter experiences. In the famous aria, *Erbarme dich*, the rain of divine mercy falls back to earth mingling with her tears, watering the parched heart.

The women at the foot of the cross could answer Pilate's question, "What is truth?" It is a question asked by endless generations of undergraduates, but it is also the only question that is left when our lives collapse around us or when disaster overwhelms us in Haiti or Chile. Pilate assumed the question had no answer. The answer arises in a woman's voice borne across the waters with the sound of a flute. It is a list of miracles, giving sight to the blind, making the lame walk, raising the poor, welcoming and sheltering people who have lost all sense of self-worth -- the miracles that are at some level the day-to-day unpaid work of most women on the planet.

The heavenly violin solo of *Erbarme dich* descends upon someone who has asked for and received forgiveness; it is followed by a violin solo from hell that depicts the violent suicide of someone who asked for forgiveness and was refused. The bass narrates the anguish of the tortured violin line. The bass sings on behalf of a range of people – Judas committing suicide, but also the Simon who helped Jesus carry the cross, and Joseph of Arimathea paying for a burial site. The tenor is the solitary wakeful shepherd on a mountainside, keeping vigil through the night, watching for the reappearance of a prophetic star while people and their sins sleep quietly in the valley below. He also sings of patience (eleven times!) and again of the personal translation of sorrow into joy.

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These are all roles that await each of us in some way, and that is the reason why Bach does not portray any of his figures literally, in an operatic sense. Bach and his extraordinary librettist, Picander, have faith in the primacy of poetry. They are working through metaphor and allusion. They create the open spaces which await our lives. Their surprising structure involves contrasting shapes and sizes – a Holocaust explodes in sixteen bars, while a sweet moment of spiritual illumination expands into a twelve-minute aria which opens onto eternity. The largest forces in the history of music up to that time (double chorus, double orchestras) give way to intimate trio sonatas and duets. Incredibly long intricate phrases, emotional deep breathing, contrast with short shocking statements. This is music for the soul but also, inescapably music for the body. Bach and Picander come back again and again to the limbs, to vulnerable flesh.

Their breathtaking scope of internal and external time replays the strategies of the Holy Books themselves, which is to unite all historical periods in a grand design. The *oboe d'amores* transmute into wailing soprano saxophones from the South Side of Chicago in the early '50s. This is the Mystery of the Cross, incarnated and unknowable, as in a Russia icon, a Tarkovsky movie, or a freely-bleeding Holy Day processional in the Philippines. Bach and Picander place citations from early generations of visionaries and prophets alongside contemporary reactions and in the process old stories are rediscovered in new and ongoing lives. History, poetry, and theology interact on multiple, simultaneous planes to offer a composite view of an unfolding reality that began long before we were born, and is brought into new fruition in our lifetime, and further fullness in the lifetimes of our children.

Across these multiple lifetimes and lifelines we discover many truths that are eternal and resonating through the centuries and through our fingertips. But we also discover contradictions and complications, some of which we do not want to pass on to our children or to their children. The treatment of the Jews, already has a questionable presence in the original gospels. It has become difficult to accept and impossible to perpetuate in our own era. When the Jews repeat, sixteen times in German, that Jesus' blood is on them and their children, it is difficult for modern ears not to trace the sound to Dachau – and the way this verse has been used across history as an excuse to exterminate a people. These choruses in the *Matthew Passion* call upon all of us to respond with insight and sensitivity to redirect a performance tradition that has presented the Jews as thoughtless, savage, brutal, and guilty for all time. Meanwhile Pilate and the Romans are strangely whitewashed and exonerated – these are just some of the questions that are newly debated by new generations of Biblical scholars and a range of thinking people.

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So of course there is no such thing as a definitive version of the *Matthew Passion* or even a version of the historical events that we can all agree upon or see in the same light. Each generation comes to this material with their own understandings and their own questions. Bach is certainly the great composer of questions – again and again each of his interpolations into the Biblical narrative of the *St. Matthew Passion* is a question, a question that hovers in the air across the centuries, or a question that demands that we give it our own urgent, very personal answer. Ongoing relentless, swirling debate is one of the aspects of this narrative and of this piece that will remain fresh across the ages.

Our great-grandparents' generation came to the *Matthew Passion* with a Victorian sense of grandeur and scale. The chorales majestically reinforced doctrinal dogma in a way that was unquestioned, and the somewhat overwhelming sign of "greatness" was writ large across every gesture of the music. A visionary artist such as Mengelberg in the '30s, as Europe was coming apart, created a massive, glowing cauldron of smoldering orchestral sounds and fathomless despair. After World War II, performances led by Wilhelm Furtwängler and Otto Klemperer gave almost unbearable weight of tragic feeling and remorse to this music, at times approaching stasis.

More recently, the brilliant instrumental and vocal insights of the Early Music movement have brought a freshness of articulation and deftness of touch that have both sharpened the astringencies and filled the work with new light and air. Perhaps some of the fast speeds of their performances reflect the Internet age and our easy consumerism. Organized religion is increasingly no longer part of most people's lives and church services themselves have often become more lightweight and entertainment-oriented. In our world today, we have much to regret, to deplore and to repent of, but we have very few examples of sustained, collective self-reflection and mourning.

For Bach, music was not primarily an aesthetic question. His weekly Cantatas and his Passions were engaged in the day-to-day hands-on work of helping people recover from their addictions, rebuild their lives, and work deeply through their despair until they find hope. Bach's artistic brief was to offer comfort to the lonely, the sick, and the bereaved, to talk people down from suicide, to provoke tears of repentance and to let them flow freely. Bach knew that the first rule of sustaining community is to meet the needs of the most troubled person in the room, and to create a gradually ascending path that people can travel together. The joy in Bach's music reflects the overwhelming happiness of redeemed lives. And the sadness of Bach's music reflects the bereavement, yearning, soul searching, and heartache of a restless spirit.

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Today, with the Berlin Philharmonic, we are not performing Bach's *Matthew Passion* in a church, or in a church service. We are not preaching a doctrine or reinforcing a dogma, musical or religious. The congregation will not turn to Hymn #374 and sing the chorale together with the Berlin Radio Chorus. A secular context, perhaps, offers this work other possibilities, and other audiences.

Perhaps we can find a way to speak of the spiritually charged lives and morally challenged paths that every human being negotiates hourly. Perhaps we can come to the chorales not as predigested statements of a corporate body, but as deeply private reflections and utterances which none of us would dream of speaking aloud to other human beings. Perhaps what we can do as artists is offer an approach to the piece that is for each of us individually, and for the shared moments of our short time here together, in a concert hall, and on the face of the earth, very personal.