Bach Passions and Jewish-Christian Relations

01.06.2020 | Alexandra Wright

Can the Bach Passions do anything for Jewish–Christian relations, not just on the basis of the magnificence of Bach's music, but taking into account the words and context, the cultural and religious milieu in which these works were written, as well as their theologies, expressed in the several layers of texts in the libretto, drawn from different historical periods.

One can easily imagine a Christian appreciation of the drama, intensity and beauty of the Bach Passions. The texts and music take the individual on a spiritual and emotional journey of such seriousness and passion that it can be transformative. But a Jewish approach comes from an utterly different direction, coloured by the hostility of the Gospels towards Jews (especially John) and nearly two thousand years of persecution, expulsion and false accusations of deicide and ritual murder against Jews. And so addressing this subject is deeply asymmetrical – Bach uses Christian scripture, the fundamental text and foundational story of Christianity. But what can it mean for Jews? How can Jews read the story of the Gospels, and particularly the story of the Passion in which the Jews are given a deeply adverse role, in a meaningful way?

Like their predecessors, the music and words of Bach's Passions served as a kind of musical and verbal sermon in their own right. Their structure was designed to focus not only on the text of the Gospels themselves, but on the individual worshipper, drawing their attention through additional texts and through the music, itself a form of exegesis, on the spiritual condition of the worshipper. It is through understanding this structure and listening to the music that one can, perhaps, reach a deeper appreciation of the Bach Passions and argue carefully that they might well be able to do something for Jewish–Christian relations.

Text and Context in Bach Passions

The Bach Passions are constructed narratively around the account of the Passion of Jesus – Matthew 26–27 and John 18–19 – Matthew beginning with the chief priests and elders of the people conspiring to arrest Jesus and kill him; John, in a slightly different way, revealing a Jesus who knows that he would be denied by Simon Peter and betrayed by Judas Iscariot and is about to be arrested. Matthew ends with the sealing of the sepulchre and setting a watch over the tomb; John ends similarly with the laying of Jesus in a tomb just before the preparations for Passover are to begin (John 19:42).

But both Passions weave a second genre of text into these monumental works. These are not biblical passages, but contemporary religious poetry from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They form a kind of commentary on the Gospel – or more accurately a profound, contemporary theological, personal and communal reflection on the story.[1] In Matthew, Bach worked with a librettist, Christian Friedrich Henrici (14 January 1700–10 May 1764), who wrote under the pen name Picander and who wrote libretti for many of Bach's cantatas. In John, Bach used words and music from existing Lutheran chorales and religious poetry by a number of poets of the period.

The effect of these two interweaving layers produces two distinct timescales: (1) the events as told in the New Testament; and (2) contemporary reflection, in Bach's own time, and in the time of the

listener, now and in the past. So there is an interaction of past and present; the poetry provides a form of exegesis throughout the works, reflecting on the Gospel, but in a very individual and introspective way. At the same time, this privatised element of faith is reflected back into the Gospel narrative. The effect is to help the worshipper internalise the biblical text, not to objectify the text, but to see themselves as the subjects of the drama. The story becomes their story of sin, confession and repentance. Peter's denial of Jesus is their denial; they are the folk who require mercy from God. It is true that it may be difficult for modern audiences to dissociate themselves from the negative portrayal of the Jews in St John's Gospel, but it is also true that the arias, or madrigals, as they are sometimes called, set to deeply moving music, compel the worshipper to focus on the 'recesses' of their own heart (St John Passion, Choral, No. 27), to contemplate the Cross when darkness and thoughts of death overcome them.

It takes some energy to be able to refocus our attention away from 'Die Juden' ['the Jews'] and the more hostile choruses that are set to the words of the Gospel. Seeing performances of the St John Passion in which the choir and soloists dramatise the words with forceful intensity is also difficult. But if one is going to make a case for performances of these works and allow them to become a focus for discussion between Jews and Christians, a catalyst for dialogue and understanding, then we need to be more open to the universal themes that are expressed through the texts of the arias.

The following sections illustrate Bach's treatment of these different layers of texts in both Passions.

Narrative or dramatic recitatives: the Gospel texts of both Matthew and John are written as recitatives. They move the narrative forward, as told by the Evangelist; they introduce the personae – Jesus, Peter, Pilate and so on, and are usually accompanied by some kind of continuo – violin or harpsichord. We should note particularly the role of Jesus, always a bass, as opposed to the Evangelist who is a tenor. This role of Jesus has been described as having, as it were, a musical 'halo' – you can hear this in the string accompaniment which is much richer and has a more velvet sound than other recitative parts. The recitative is often intensely dramatic, particularly in those parts of the Passions where Jesus is scourged, mocked and suffers – the music is almost graphic in its depiction of the events that are taking place.

Lyrical, contemplative arias: the words of these arias are by Lutheran poets of the seventeenth or eighteenth century. In the case of the St Matthew Passion, they are mostly by Picander. In the following example, the aria follows a recitative that deals with Judas taking his own life: when he sees that Jesus is condemned to death, he repents and brings thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders and confesses his sin. Judas throws down the silver, departs and then hangs himself. The chief priests take the silver and say: 'It is not lawful to put them in the treasury because it is the price of blood'. And then follows this bass aria «Gebt mir meinen Jesum wieder!» (No. 51, literal translation):

Give me back my Jesus!

See, the money, the murder reward,

The lost son trows (it)

To your feet down.

In this aria, the voice-persona reflects on the Gospel narrative – Judas's betrayal of Jesus, his attempt to part with blood money and the chief priests' rejection of that silver. But this is also the voice of the individual worshipper in Leipzig on Good Friday – we can hear the voice of repentance in those words, 'Give me back my Jesus'. The Christian worshipper, too, is the 'lost son', finding their way back to their faith.

We see this, too, in the exquisitely beautiful aria 'Erbame, dich' ('Have mercy', No. 47 words by Picander), which follows Peter's denial of Jesus in Matthew 26:74–75: 'I know not the man'. The listener is caught in the drama of the Good Friday narrative at one remove and is led to understand that it is the crowd who are responsible for the flagellation and mockery of Jesus. But this aria that follows and the earlier chorale shift the focus from the Gospel narrative to the worshipper him or herself. Responsibility for the death of Jesus lies not only with the crowd – unidentified in the St Matthew Passion – but the individual who contemplates their own sin and sense of accountability. The contralto aria reflects on Peter's weeping, but is also the voice of the individual, begging for mercy, for God to look upon the individual sinner with compassion.

Devotional – communal chorales: these take the form of well-known hymn tunes employed by Bach. There is some debate as to whether the congregation would join in with these chorales. It is more likely that they would be sung by a small group of choristers who sang the parts and the whole work. Throughout the St Matthew Passion, Bach uses five stanzas from the Lutheran hymn 'Befiehl du deine Wege' ('Commend your way'). The first stanza is found at No. 53, following the Gospel passage in which Pilate questions Jesus, and asks him, 'Are you King of the Jews?' Jesus neither denies nor acknowledges and Pilate is amazed. The chorale is addressed here to the individual worshipper; it calls on the individual to deliver their burdens and cares to Christ, for he will bear their sorrows.

Monumental choruses frame both the John and Matthew Passions at the beginning and end. Again, the words are taken from religious poetry of the period, used by Bach, although in the first chorus of the St John Passion, Bach somewhat surprisingly uses Luther's translation of Psalm 8 and sets it next to an anonymous poetic interpretation which gives the Psalm a Christocentric meaning. The word 'Herr' is repeated three times, evoking the Trinitarian understanding of God. This is a unique opening among contemporary passion settings in that the focus is not on what the passion means for the redemption of humanity, but rather on the nature of Jesus. Lutheran theology is at work here: 'Herr Luther . . . sums up [Psalm 8] in the following way: it is a prophecy of Christ, his suffering on the cross, resurrection, and ruling over all creatures (…) a kingdom established not by sword and armour, but by word & faith' (Calov, *Die heilige Bibel*).[2]

Contribution to Jewish–Christian relations

What can we say about the contribution of the Bach Passions to Jewish–Christian relations? Firstly, it's important to acknowledge that the Gospels are time bound, written in a specific time and place; John – the latest of all four Gospels – distances Jesus from the world into which he was born and grew up. It is a confessional, meditative piece, a statement of faith with a highly complex theology that is creating something new in the way that it sees Jesus.

Secondly, we need to recognise and acknowledge the painful history of Jewish–Christian relations – the charge of deicide that was levelled against the Jews right up until the twentieth century when the Vatican re-evaluated its whole relationship with the Jewish people in *Nostra Aetate* (1965), removed the charge and allowed the Catholic Church to move forward in Jewish–Christian dialogue. The liturgy of Good Friday has changed; gone are the readings about the 'perfidious Jews' and there is an awareness of the danger of drawing out from the Gospel or from Bach a view that might colour attitudes today.

At the end of the day, for me it is about how I approach and read the Christian Scriptures as a Jew

– the Gospels as they stand, as part of the sacred canon for Christians, and as mediated through great works of art – whether painting, sculpture or music, or in other ways. Just as the Exodus from Egypt and Sinai is the foundational narrative for the Jewish people, I must acknowledge and recognise that the Passion of Christ is the foundational narrative and source of faith for Christians.

Yet – and this is perhaps what is so remarkable about both of Bach's Passions – even if the lens, the way we see these theological issues, is different, one can acknowledge that we share fundamental themes that lie at the heart of Bach's works. For the message of the Passions, in the end, is addressed to the individual worshipper, contemplating their lowly human existence in the world, reflecting on their sinfulness, on suffering and woe, rousing themselves to repentance and faith and facing the ultimate judgement of death. These are universal themes – Christians approach them through the revelation of Christ; Jews through their own revelation of Torah.

Listening to or performing the Bach Passions can do much for Jewish–Christian relations provided that it is done so responsibly, with talks, discussions, programme notes, and provided that we understand the historical context in which the Gospels were written and the Passions were composed. We cannot alter history, but we can adapt our theology so that it is not hostility, resentment and supersessionism that determine our relationship with each other, but open dialogue, acknowledgement both of difference and of the things we share – the human condition and our propensity for good and evil and our faith in a mysterious but infinitely loving God.

---

[1] I am extremely grateful to Jonathan Gorsky, lecturer in Abrahamic Religions at Heythrop College, London for his observations particularly on these poetic reflections on the narrative.

[2] The Calov Bible is a Lutheran Bible with commentary and is known to have been owned by Bach. A copy of these three volumes, published in Wittenberg in 1681–82, is now in the library of Concordia Seminary in St Louis (Missouri) and contains marginal notes written by Bach himself.

Excepted (with slight changes) from Alexandra Wright "What Have the Bach Passions Ever Done for Jewish–Christian Relations?", *European Judaism* 53/1 (Spring 2020), p. 105–119. Alexandra Wright is Senior Rabbi at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, London. She was ordained at Leo Baeck College, London in 1986. Used with permission.

Copyright JCRelations