

Introduction

During our Bristol Bach Choir tour to Germany in the summer of 2009, we had the privilege of performing a concert in the Thomaskirche, Leipzig, the church where Bach was Kantor from 1723 until his death in 1750. After the concert, many of us took the chance to visit the Nikolaikirche, one of the other churches where Bach was responsible for the music. We walked the half mile or so through Leipzig town centre, cutting across the market square, taking much the same route as Bach himself must have done as he hurried between the two churches.

We were all immediately struck by the difference in style between the two churches. The Thomaskirche had a plain and austere dignity, with the few splashes of colour the flowers that were scattered on Bach's grave by the altar. The Nikolaikirche, on the other hand, was a confection of pastel colours, with agapanthus leaf topped pillars, elaborate balconies and marbled decoration, more like a theatre than a balconies and marbled decoration, more like a theatre than a church.

This contrast between the austere and the highly decorated, between the sacred and the secular, is in a way a physical example of one of the dualisms that make Bach's great passion setting so fascinating and challenging for us, although perhaps not quite in the way that we might at first think. We can all immediately

understand the St Matthew Passion as a 'dramatic' work. For us the most obvious examples of this sense of drama are the short choruses where the singers take the collective words of participants in the story; the crowds calling for Jesus to be crucified, the scribes and Pharisees haughtily pleading some point of scriptural order, or the disciples asking Jesus who will betray him.

But for Bach's listeners, the parts of the work that were the most 'dramatic' – that is, most closely associated with the theatre – were the recitatives and arias. These were the defining forms of opera, and for some listeners of the time, had no place in a work intended for liturgical use. For us, on the other hand, these meditative movements are often almost prayerful in their introspection.

Our way of approaching this music must be very different from that of an 18th century listener. We cannot recreate their understanding of how this work fit into their cultural world. However it is testimony to the genius of J.S. Bach that we are still performing and listening to this work today, and we know that we are about to hear one of the most moving and meaningful pieces of music ever written.