

Listening notes

The texts and translations that follow are divided into the seventeen scenes and introductions as envisaged by Bach and Picander, and each section also has some listening notes. The scene descriptors in italics are Picander's own.

PART ONE

Introduction. The Daughters of Zion and the Faithful: (No. 1)

The dialogue between the daughters of Zion and the Faithful is made obvious in this opening number as question and answer are passed from side to side between the two choirs. As the movement progresses, a third element is introduced – the chorale '*O Lamm Gottes unschuldig*'. This was originally just played instrumentally, but Bach later revised his scoring to add a choir of soprano voices (in actual fact just one or two singers) which he placed in a separate organ loft to give a sense of spatial separation.

When the woman anointed Jesus: (Nos. 2 - 10)

In this scene we meet for the first time many of the forms that reappear throughout the work. There is the relatively sparsely accompanied recitative that is used for the words of the Evangelist, and the sustained string accompaniment which – with one exception – is used for the words of Jesus. We have the first of the chorales, set in relatively straightforward four-part harmony, with the instruments simply doubling the vocal lines. There are also two short choruses, known as *turbæ* choruses, where the singers represent particular groups of people, in this case, the chief priests and scribes, and the disciples. The chorus for the chief priests and scribes ('*Ja nicht auf das Fest*') is in eight parts, and uses both choirs of voices antiphonally, whereas the one for the disciples ('*Wozu dienet dieser Unrat*') is in just four parts.

The emotional heart of this scene is the alto recitative and aria pair '*Du lieber Heiland du – Buß und Reu*'. Like most of the arias in this work, it is a *da capo* aria, the archetypal operatic form, where the main A section material is followed by a contrasting B section, before the A section is repeated.

The flutes are used so imaginatively here; listen how in the A section the phrases often begin in unison, but are then torn in two, an obvious mirroring of the opening text, and then how in the B section the flutes delicately portray the singer's teardrops.

When Judas took the 30 silver pieces: (Nos. 11 - 12)

The aria in this scene is one of the relatively few given by Bach to a soloist from the second choir. This point is slightly obscured in tonight's performance, because we are not using different soloists for choir 1 and choir 2 arias. However, the division is made clear by the fact that this aria is accompanied by the second orchestra (to your right as you look at the stage) rather than by the first. Again it is a *da capo* aria, and despite the seriousness of the situation, a feature is Bach's use of the fashionably *galant* device of syncopation. The flute here doubles the voice – it may have been that Bach's second choir soprano was a slightly unconfident singer, and needed a little support.

When Jesus kept the Passover: (Nos. 13 - 19)

The scene opens with one of the gentler *turbæ* choruses, the disciples asking where they should prepare the Passover meal. Later, they ask Jesus in horror who will betray him ('*Herr, bin ich's?*'). In the music, the question is asked 11 times. The twelfth disciple, Judas, does not need to ask.

The chorale that immediately follows opens with an inversion of the words of the question, '*Ich bins*'; an example of the way the different textual sources are carefully joined together into a coherent and self-referential whole.

Jesus' words at the Last Supper, a deeply significant theological moment, are given special treatment, as the usual accompanied recitative is expanded into a more extensive and lyrical *arioso* (a form halfway between a recitative and an aria). For the recitative and the radiant soprano aria which conclude the scene, the oboists change to the oboe d'amore, which is slightly lower pitched and sweeter toned than the regular oboe.

When Jesus quailed at the Mount of Olives (Zion and the Faithful): (Nos. 20 - 26)

At certain moments, Bach allows touches of illustration in the accompaniment of the recitative – listen here for the little rising scale as the disciples go up to the Mount of Olives, and the battering semiquavers at the smiting of the shepherd and the scattering of the sheep. This scene contains the first two appearances of the passion chorale (known to us as 'O sacred head sore wounded'), first in E major, then a semitone lower in E flat. The recitative and the aria that conclude this scene both incorporate a chorale as part of the accompaniment. As the heading of the scene makes clear, the tenor is understood to represent the Daughter of Zion, and the accompanying choir the Faithful. The recitative uses the unusual instrumental combination of flutes and oboes da caccia (the tenor member of the oboe family, dark toned and with a curved body and flared bell like a hunting horn). The text of the aria is carefully constructed so that it picks out opposing images from the chorale text. So, we have the juxtaposition of the pairs *wachen/schlafen* (waking/sleeping) and *freuen/leiden* (rejoicing/sorrowing).

Prayer on the Mount of Olives: (Nos. 27 - 29)

After the words 'Oh my Father ... let this cup pass from me', Bach assigns this aria to the bass in choir 2.

The dark and sombre mood belies the surface sentiment of the text, and instead captures something of a deeper meaning, where a faithful believer might, like Jesus in the garden, wish that the suffering of cross and cup and might pass by.

When Jesus was captured (Zion and the Faithful): (Nos. 30 - 35)

This scene opens with a duet for soprano and alto, juxtaposed with brusque interjections from the chorus. Again the soloists are understood to represent the Daughters of Zion, whereas the chorus are the Faithful. They give two radically opposing perspectives on the scene that is unfolding: the soloists react in almost cinematic slow motion, compared with the brutality of the action and the roughness of the interruptions of the Faithful. This is followed by a virtuosic and stormy outburst from the two choirs, '*Sind Blitze, sind Donner*'.

The first half of the work concludes with the lovely chorale fantasia, '*O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß*'.

INTERVAL

PART TWO

Introduction. The Faithful and Zion: (No. 36)

The second half of the work opens with another of the movements that contrasts a solo voice, here the alto, with the chorus. The soloist begins with a long held note, and the sense of loss, that time is standing still is intensified by the fact that the accompaniment is for the moment without the security of the bass instruments. The chorus has a gentle fugue, a device commonly used to express searching or longing. The movement ends with an unanswered question, both in the text and in the music, which finishes on an unresolved dominant.

His interrogation by the high priests: (Nos. 37 - 41)

After the words — 'But Jesus kept silent', the accompaniment to the tenor recitative is an extraordinary musical meditation on keeping silence, as oboes, continuo and viola da gamba play staccato quaver chords with no rhythmic or melodic variety. The aria also uses the viola da gamba as an *obbligato* solo instrument, which was a later addition by Bach to the scoring. This instrument is played by being supported between the legs like the Baroque cello, for it has no spike, but unlike the cello, it also has frets. The aria itself is a call for patience — despite the thrusting and impatient nature of the accompaniment.

When Peter wept: (Nos. 42 - 48)

During this scene we have the first of the *turbae* choruses singing the words of the crowds as they call for Jesus' death. They taunt Him, asking '*Wer ists, der dich schlug?*' ('Who was it that smote thee?') The same singers — but now in the personae of present day believers — immediately follow this with the gentle and compassionate chorale '*Wer hat dich so geschlagen*'. The aria that follows Peter's denial, '*Erbarme dich*' is for many the most heartfelt and meaningful in the whole work. The alto soloist shares the musical stage with the solo violin, which steps out of the string texture of the first orchestra, and the solo vocal and instrumental lines are richly ornamented in the most lustrous Italianate style.

Judas in the Temple: (Nos. 49 - 52)

After the words — 'It is not lawful ... because it is the price of blood', the aria also uses a solo violin in the accompaniment, but this time the style is quite different. This has something of the operatic 'rage aria' about it, as the singer captures Judas' horror and despair at what he has done.

Jesus before Pilate: (Nos. 53 - 58)

After the words — 'What evil has He done?', the passion chorale makes its third appearance. During the next recitative, there comes the terrifying moment when the crowd call for the release of Barabbas. The chord used by Bach here is only a diminished 7th — really quite common harmonic currency for the time — yet it somehow seems to be the most brutal chord ever written. Next comes the first instance of the '*kreuzigen*' chorus, the crowd's fugal and densely chromatic call for Jesus to be crucified.

The oboes da caccia make another appearance in the soprano recitative and aria here. In the recitative they are accompanied by the continuo, but in the aria they themselves form the accompaniment to the solo flute, and there is no basso continuo support. This is known as a *bassetto* aria, and Bach's listeners would have understood this as indicating a moment when it seemed that the support of God (as signified by the solid harmonic support of the continuo group) had vanished.

When Jesus was scourged: (Nos. 59 - 61)

The '*kreuzigen*' chorus is repeated, a tone higher than in the last scene, which increases the dramatic tension of the scene. The scourging of Jesus is vividly depicted by the strokes of the string players accompanying the alto recitative, and the dotted rhythm used carries forward into the aria accompaniment that follows.

When Simon of Cyrene was compelled to bear His cross: (Nos. 62 - 66)

Here we have the fourth appearance of the passion chorale, this time with two stanzas. Again, the tenderness expressed in this chorale is in stark contrast to the mocking of the crowd in the immediately preceding *turba* chorus. The aria in this scene is the first in the work for the bass of choir 1 who, up to this point (in Bach's original scoring), has sung the words of Jesus. There is symmetry here, unfortunately lost in modern performances which separate the aria singer from the singer of the role of Jesus. The man who moments ago was singing the words of Jesus now expresses the sentiment of Simon of Cyrene, who helps Jesus carry the burden of the cross, and this is a personification of the argument of the aria's text which is that if the singer finds the burden of the cross too much to bear, Jesus will come to his aid.

The aria is the second of the two accompanied by the viola da gamba. For the baroque audience, this instrument was laden with significance as one of the quiet, chamber instruments, a portent of both death and sleep.

When Jesus was crucified: (Nos. 67 - 70)

One of the most extraordinary moments of this work is the recitative and aria pair in this scene, for alto and oboes da caccia. The oboes da caccia are used increasingly towards the end of the work as the story comes to its bitter conclusion, and the tonality darkens towards flat keys. The recitative is probably the most tonally complex thing Bach ever wrote, and is haunting and unsettling to hear. It must also have been unsettling to play for the oboists, as the multiple flats required stretched the instruments' capabilities to the limit. The aria, however, is deeply moving as a moment of almost unbearable loveliness at the point of such suffering.

When Jesus was taken down from the cross: (Nos. 71 - 75)

Jesus' final words from the cross are delivered starkly, without the usual sustained string accompaniment. The moment of His death is followed by the final repetition of the passion chorale. The text verse used here is one where the faithful reflect upon their own death, so the significance of Bach's choice would have been obvious to the whole congregation. Bach also chose to mark this moment harmonically in a way that was probably only obvious to his young performers. The previous repetitions of the passion chorale moved through different keys in a methodical way: the first is in E major (four sharps), then E-flat major (three flats), then D major (two sharps) then F major (one flat). Each ends unequivocally in the major key suggested by the key signature. Following this logic, this final repetition should be in C major (no sharps or flats). But instead the tonality hovers around A minor, with the final cadence ambiguous and modal (ending on E major, the dominant of A minor).

We are pulled from sorrow by the rending of the veil of the temple, with the continuo accompaniment at its most agitated. Next comes what some have termed the most significant two bars of music ever written, where the crowd of onlookers acknowledge that this was the Son of God (*'Wahrlich, dieser ist Gottes Sohn gewesen'*).

The mood changes as the scene ends with the tender and consoling bass aria *'Mache dich, mein Herze, rein'*. The congregation would have recognised this as an operatic slumber song, with its twin associations of sleep and death. It is worth pausing briefly to imagine how this moment would have felt for the Leipzig congregation. The service had started at 2pm, some five hours earlier, and now as we reach this point, with the singer describing the arrival of evening in Jerusalem, the light of the Leipzig spring evening would also have been fading and the church falling into darkness.

The burial: (Nos. 76 - 78)

After the words 'And they sealed the stone', the final scene calls on Baroque operatic tradition. At the end of an opera as Bach would have known them, all the characters would gather on stage, and each would deliver a line or two of accompanied recitative, and there would often be a passage of recitative for all characters together. Then the final number would be sung, a dance-like movement, usually in triple time, all action of the drama now complete. Here we have almost exactly the same thing, a final gathering of all voices, before a final chorus. But instead of the often facile or simplistic operatic closing number, we have the incomparable *'Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder'*. Even in the last bar of the whole work, Bach still manages to make a point – listen for the almost unbearable clash as the violins and wind instruments delay their resolution of the last chord – one final moment of suffering before we can leave the passion story behind, and look forward to Easter.