

The Passion in 18th Century Leipzig

A musical passion setting was an essential part of the Good Friday Vesper service in Leipzig, and would have been the first music heard by the congregation after the long silence of Lent. The service was held in alternate years in the Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche. For Bach's first Easter in Leipzig, in 1724, it was the turn of the Nikolaikirche, and this was the year Bach composed his St John Passion, BWV 245. Unfortunately there was an embarrassing mix-up, because no-one seems to have told Bach about the arrangement of alternating the Good Friday vesper service between the two churches, and he had assumed that the service would be held in the Thomaskirche.

Libretto leaflets had already been printed giving the Thomaskirche as the location, the harpsichord in the Nikolaikirche was unusable, and there wasn't enough room in the organ loft for all the performers. With the help of the town council there was a hurried printing of correction notices, the harpsichord was repaired, and the Nikolaikirche organ loft was reorganised to make room for the performers, and so disaster was averted.

Over the next few years, Bach expanded his working collection of passion music that could be used for the Good Friday services. On some occasions he used passion music by other composers, such as a St. Mark Passion by Reinhard Keiser in 1726, or a St Luke Passion that used to be attributed to Bach himself. (This St Luke Passion is a work of considerable beauty, but stylistically it is quite clear that it is not by Bach.) On other occasions he used his own music; the St John Passion already mentioned, the now lost St Mark Passion, BWV 247, and of course, the St Matthew Passion, BWV244.

Bach's obituary notice states that he composed five passion settings. Four are therefore accounted for (Matthew, John, the missing Mark and the mis-attributed Luke). The fifth is thought to have been another setting based on the St Matthew gospel, made up of fragments of earlier compositions, and

quite possibly including early prototypes of movements that in their revised form are now part of this St Matthew Passion, BWV 244.

On Good Friday in Leipzig, the church bells were rung at 1.45pm for fifteen minutes, to summon the congregation, and the service began at 2pm. The order of service was:

Hymn

Passion music (part 1)

Hymn

Sermon

Passion music (part 2)

Motet – Ecce quomodo moritur justus

Passion verse and prayer

Hymn

At the heart of the service was the sermon, and this was always at least one hour long, and often nearer two. So on Good Friday 1727, the day of the first performance of the St Matthew Passion, this must have been a long service indeed, possibly lasting for nearly six hours.

We have no record of how the congregation in Leipzig responded to Bach's music, although we know that there was general unease at the time about the use of secular 'operatic' forms in church. However, we do know a little about general behaviour during church services. It may seem shocking to us, but reports from the time show that the congregation did not sit in respectful silence during the service. It seemed to have been regarded as more of a social occasion. Young gentlemen took the chance to parade up and down the aisles in full view of the young ladies in the balconies, and the young ladies would write notes and throw them down to be caught – with luck by the right gentleman – below. Perhaps modern habits of sending text messages at inappropriate moments are not so new after all.