

The texts of the St Matthew Passion

The text of the St Matthew Passion comes from three sources. First is the biblical text, both the narrative text as sung by the Evangelist and the reported words of Jesus and other characters. The second source is the chorale verses. These are from various writers, and would have been well known to the Leipzig congregation. The third is the meditative poetry, newly written by the poet Christian Friedrich Henrici, also known by his pen name Picander. Libretto booklets of Picander's words were on sale to the congregation (it was assumed that they needed no reminding of the biblical texts or the chorale verses). The passion setting is divided by Bach and Picander into fifteen scenes and two introductions. Each of these scenes or introductions contains one of Picander's poems. Most of these poems are in two sections, and are therefore set by Bach as a recitative and aria pair for solo voice. Some though, are set for all the voices in both choirs, or for a solo voice contrasted with a choir. Where voices from both choirs are used, the text is marked by Picander as referring to the 'Daughters of Zion' (choir 1) and 'the Faithful' (choir 2).

