

Program Note Preview - St John Passion
Sunday, March 29 at 2:30pm
Christ Church Cathedral | 930 Burdett Ave

By Christina Hutten

Since its first performance in Leipzig on Good Friday 1724, Bach's St. John Passion has gathered around itself so many interpretations and reactions. Although we cannot really know how its first listeners experienced the work, at least some of them complained that it resulted in a vespers service that was far too long and operatic. Later, Bach's masterpieces were taken as evidence of great genius. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote "that when listening to Bach's music it is as if we are present at the moment in which God created the world." Disturbingly, both the St. John and the St. Matthew Passion were treated by the German National Socialists as "odes to de-Judaization." Later, scholars, including Michael Marissen, have extensively argued that there is no evidence of anti-Jewish sentiment on the part of Bach, and that the opposite might in fact be true. Some have called Bach the "fifth evangelist," while others have questioned the value of performing his sacred music today. They argue that "twenty-first-century listeners... longer share the same devotional and social context as Bach's contemporaries," and that therefore "much of the meaning of the devotional story of Bach's time may have been lost to present-day hearers of the work." On the contrary, I suggest that Bach's St. John Passion is something like a path of pilgrimage with almost inexhaustible things to notice, experience, and contemplate. It transcends a single historical moment, purpose, or interpretation. To step into the piece either as listener or performer is to embark with countless others from across time and around the world on a journey of the soul.

British travel writer Oliver Smith considers "making meaning by making journeys" a basic human habit. I think his observation applies as much to physical travel as to the mental travel of storytelling. With the St. John Passion, we journey to first-century Jerusalem with John as guide to witness suffering, political machinations, the consequences of mob mentality, and also moments of deep tenderness and compassion. In line with a centuries-old tradition of chanting the biblical Passion, Bach gives the words of the biblical text to the Evangelist, the singer who plays the role of John and who sings in recitative, a musical style designed to mimic and heighten the normal inflections of speech. The Evangelist is joined by several other characters, Jesus, Pilate, Peter, servants, and a chorus of onlookers, all of whom dramatize the Biblical text in song. Bach scholar Christoff Wolff notes that this portion of the St. John Passion has a level of musical coherence that suggest it was composed separately from the interpretive arias and chorales.

Layers of meaning are inherent in the structure of Bach's St. John Passion. Woven through the biblical narrative are the poetic texts of arias and chorales that provide moments of reflection. They are like the pilgrimage experiences of individuals and communities journeying through the biblical narrative in Bach's day. The insights of the arias and chorales include meditations on personal involvement in evil from apathy to incitement, emotional responses to Jesus's pain and dying, and contemplation of how to orient one's life and devotion. The overall sweep of Bach's St. John Passion seems to me to resonate with Brazilian author Paulo Coelho's reflections on the meaning of life while traveling the Camino de Santiago. It is "a long pilgrimage from fear to love."

Whatever your relationship to the music of Bach or the Christian faith, I hope you will join us on this musical pilgrimage with openness to the depths and mysteries so many have found in it. For, in the words of seventeenth-century poet Abraham Cowley, "curiosity does, no less than devotion, pilgrims make."