



## THIS WEEK'S PONDERING

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### A Lenten Devotional Exercise

**WARNING:** This listening project may be a little more work for some people than others. It requires some opening of the mind to some elements not commonly found in today's cultural norms. My goal here is to just give you some background and a way "in" to enjoying this great treasure from our Christian past.

I am recommending that you listen (to all or just part) to the **St. Matthew Passion** (or **Passion According to St. Matthew**) by J. S. Bach, either now or some time before Good Friday. This is a monumental work of art that can seriously enrich your personal, spiritual and devotional life in a way that only music really can. As a singer, it helps to be able to perform the work and "get inside" the music, but it can certainly be enjoyed and absorbed by simply knowing what to listen for.

The composer, Johann Sebastian Bach, (1685-1750) likely needs little to no introduction. Everyone studying a musical instrument has heard of J. S. Bach, the heavy-faced German dude who wrote impossibly intricate strands of melody and counterpoint, arguably the "best" composer . . . hmmm. Please follow this link to learn a bit more about him on Professor Carol's blog if you wish.

<https://www.professorcarol.com/composer-bach/>

Then too, you may be wondering, if you generally don't care for classical music, why start with something as difficult as a two-hour *tour-de-force* work filled with dramatic singing?

Because, in my humble opinion, it is well worth your time and effort to understand it. You do not need to accomplish the added hurdle of studying German (which I was lucky enough to do), because today we have versions of the work with lyrics in English (whew!). Composers, artists and architects of Bach's time knew nothing of the planned obsolescence we experience today in the arts (*You know, that worship song was written back in 1985!*) but rather, they consciously tried to create something that would speak to future generations.

Quick definition of the word "**classical**:" (*typically of a form of art*) regarded as representing an exemplary standard; traditional and long-established in form or style. Now, while I believe we should be open to new ideas, I also believe in preserving the best work of previous generations. Nothing can be gained by mindlessly tossing out the "old" stuff merely because it isn't new. A "classic" becomes so because of its enduring nature and ability to speak to multiple generations of people.

Quick definition of the word "**Passion**:" in this context of sacred classical music, the term refers to a *musical setting of the Passion narrative* (as we Lutherans are accustomed to hearing on Palm/Passion

Sunday), and of course, Bach's 2 known settings (St. Matthew and St. John) are not the only ones out there. Surprisingly to some, it does not include or extend to the Resurrection narrative (although Bach did write an Easter cantata) but *ends with the death of Christ*, making it specifically a work for Good Friday. The term "Passion" comes from Latin: "*passio*" means "I suffer."

It was composed for a small adult choir alongside a boys' choir with orchestra and soloists at the **St. Thomaskirche** (Lutheran church) in Leipzig, Germany, where Bach held the title of Cantor (or music director). As you might know, he was a formidable organist and was responsible for all the music including choirs at four different churches (all connected) in Leipzig.

You can read the lyrics here at this link. German is on the left if you wish to peruse it.

[http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes\\_translations/translations\\_cantata/t\\_bwv244.htm](http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes_translations/translations_cantata/t_bwv244.htm)

As you can see, the Passion is long because it includes other material besides simply the Gospel narrative. This lyrical construction was produced by a man named **Christian Heinrich Henrici**, writing under a pen name, **Picander**. This was not his first or last project with the famous composer. Picander includes poems and existing classic hymns, the most famous of which is "**O Sacred Head, Now Wounded**," link here [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzoi\\_QrSwxc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzoi_QrSwxc) which appears in varied iterations throughout the work. The hymns function as meditations on the words of the Gospel. Bach's settings of these hymns in 4-part harmony is especially noteworthy, and forms the basis for studies of harmony in Western music today. They became the inspiration to set hymns in 4-part harmony for centuries afterward.

It's helpful to know that the work is conceived as a dramatic production, also called an **oratorio**. There is no staging or costuming like an opera, but there are characters speaking (I mean singing) monologues, choruses reflecting on those words, and a definite story line happening.

The main dramatic characters are: **The Evangelist** (Matthew) who narrates or tells the story as a frame around the characters. He is cast for a tenor voice. There is **Christ** Himself, whose words (verbatim from the written Gospel) are highlighted by an aural "halo" of long chords in the string section. His words are sung by a bass and the words are usually delivered rapidly (recitative style). There are **Judas** (bass), **Peter** (bass), **two witnesses** (alto, tenor), **two high priests** (bass), **two maids** (soprano), Pilate (bass) and his wife (soprano.) Another important "character" is a collective one: **The crowd**, and these short choruses are known as "**turba**" or "troubled/chaotic" sounding.

If you're still with me, I'd like to quote Leonard Bernstein, conductor of the New York Philharmonic in the mid twentieth century who achieved rock star status, who revered Bach and the St. Matthew Passion, saying famously of the **opening chorus** that "there is nothing like it in all music." It juxtaposes the 2 choirs, one with introductory lyrics and the boys' choir coming in with a classic Lutheran hymn, "Lamb of God, Pure and Sinless," LBW 111.

Of course, there is much more information on this topic - just ask me! I personally have found the lyrics and music to be a rich experience and an amazing meditation on our Lord's sacrifice which we mark on Good Friday. It's not the only one, of course, or necessarily the best, but I wanted to call attention to it because it's a wonderful piece of music which is not as accessible in many ways. You likely won't see it broadcast on television or played on the radio so it's helpful just to know that it exists and where to look.

Here is a link to an entire performance in English with lyrics (very helpful!).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxROEXRSYB8> You may find that there is just too much material to absorb in one sitting. If so, feel free to come back to it when you are ready—you will always find more to love.