

# Bach and His Theology

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Preacher: Jason Cheung

[ 0 : 00 ] Yes. Okay. Oh, is he alright? That reached, yeah. I think that's right. Okay. Good morning, everybody, and it is an honor and privilege for me to speak at Learners' Exchange.

As you know, today's topic is on the Atonement Theology in the P.S. box, St. John Passion. And it just turns out that this year's Passion Friday text is based on John's Gospel.

So it all fits together, and we all happen to be at St. John's Church. A lot of John. Anyways, hopefully I will present a well-balanced presentation, a balance between musicology and theology. And do you try to stop me by looking puzzled if you're lost? And if I start to sound like I'm speaking Etrussian, okay?

Don't stop me when I speak Greek. Don't stop me when I speak German. Don't stop me when I speak GRE, G-R-E. The exam. Graduate exam.

[ 1 : 23 ] Meaning hard words. So don't stop me on those. I think there's a lot of PhDs around. You can come through with them if you hear epistemologically commensurable.

And I think there's a few theologians around, so if you hear a penal substitution, you can come through with them.

And some Greek, you can come through with them. Anyways, you have in front of you a handout. A handout for a list of a few technical terms that I'll be referring to just to provide some background, so you won't be lost by my Etrussian.

First half on theology, I'm just going to talk about two theological positions. And the latter half, there's three musical terms, musical technical terms.

Resistive, aria, and something called the still concitato. So there's some definition there, so you can refer to them when I run into those terminologies.

[ 2 : 31 ] You won't get too, too lost. Okay? So before we start, how about let us pray. Almighty God, an everlasting Father, who of thy great tender love towards mankind, have sent thy Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross.

We therefore give thanks to thee for thy passion, which was recorded by thy servant, the Apostle John, and express and artistically rendered by thy servant, Johann Sebastian Bach.

Through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen. The St. John Passion, composed in 1724, just one year after Bach left the court of Cuthon, whose prince is a Calvinist.

This passion expressed a strikingly different theology than its successor, the St. Matthew Passion, which is composed in 1727.

While the St. Matthew setting is clearly expressing the idea of penal substitution, which is the typical Lutheran theology of the cross at the time, the St. John setting presents a completely different view.

[ 4 : 08 ] Even in the opening of each passion, this is evident. Now, we can contrast the opening of each, and you probably will know what I'm talking about.

So here's the opening to the St. Matthew. And comparing to that, here's the opening to the John setting.

Contrasting these settings, one can immediately hear that the St. Matthew setting is much more grave and solemn.

Indeed, this is the case as it opens with a French-style funeral music motif. The death of Christ is going to happen, thus penal substitution. The ordained death of Christ for the penalty of our sins. But on the St. John setting, on the other hand, while it bears a degree of solemnness, there is a layer of brightness. The death of Christ is going to happen, thus penal substitution. The death of Christ is going to happen, thus penal substitution. The ordained death of Christ for the penalty of our sins.

[ 5 : 36 ] The ordained death of Christ for the penalty of our sins. But on the St. John setting, on the other hand, while it bears a degree of solemnness, there is a layer of brightness to it.

There is a kind of glory in the death of Christ. Now, if you could identify these things, it's okay. I'll convince you. I'll convince you that the St. Matthew, that there, I won't talk about St. Matthew, but on the St. John setting, there is something more optimistic to it comparatively.

So, here it is. Now, before I move into the more musical theological discussion of the St. John's Passion, let me first rehearse the theological theme of the Gospel according to John.

So, I'm going to look at Scripture first, then move on to music. Okay? Bible first, then music. The prologue of John's Gospel is John's manual for how to read his Gospel account.

In John 1, 14, And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

[ 7 : 07 ] This is why I think there is no transfiguration in John. You see, in the Synoptics, the transfiguration of Jesus represents the manifestation of His glory.

For example, in Luke's Gospel, now Peter and those who were with him were heavily with sleep. But when they became fully awake, they saw His, that is, Jesus's glory, and the two men who stood with them.

Luke 9, verse 32. Thus, Jesus's life and ministry in John's Gospel is one large transfiguration.

Therefore, when He turned water into wine, Jesus manifested His glory. John 2, 11. And having raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus said to Mary, You shall see the glory of God.

John 11, 40. Thus, the word glory functions as a sort of bookend or inclusio. In John 2, 11.

[ 8 : 21 ] In which Jesus showed snatches of His glory. Thus, when Jesus turned water into wine, it is glory.

When He cleansed the temple, it is glory. When He meets the woman at the well, it is glory. And when He said, Before Abraham was, Ego, Amy.

This is glory. That's my first bit of Greek. But there is more. After He entered Jerusalem and was received with palm branches and Hosanna, which is what today is about, apparently.

Jesus said, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. John 12, 24. Thus, the remainder of John should be read as the full manifestation of Christ's glory.

In a very surprising way. When Jesus washes His disciples' feet, is this glory? When He came forward to allow Himself to be arrested, glory?

[ 9 : 31 ] When He allowed Himself to be flogged by soldiers, glory? And when He was ultimately nailed to the cross, is this glory?

Yes, according to John, they are all part of Christ's glorification. The manifestation of the essential weightiness of God, His nature and His character.

So that's John's Gospel. The main theme in John's Gospel in a nutshell. Now, oops, I forgot about that.

So much could go wrong. Anyways, let's now modulate to music. In the beginning was the Logos. And the Logos was with God. And the Logos was God. He was in the beginning with God. And the Logos became flesh and tabernacle amongst us.

[ 10 : 40 ] And we have seen His Thoksa. We have beheld His Thoksa when He entered His Passion, which according to John Calvin, is Christ's theater of glory.

And Bach, in His St. John Passion, made this proclamation in the very opening chorus. Yahweh, our Lord, whose praise is glorious in all the lands, show us Thy Passion, that Thou, the very Son of God, in all times, even in the greatest abasment, hath been glorified.

Yahweh, our Lord, whose praise is glorious in all the lands, and the great name of God, and the great name of God, and the great name of God, and the great name of God. And of course, the first refrain here, got repeated with the recapitulation in the end.

We just heard parts of the opening chorus, if you have realized. The text here, is based on the address to God, that frames Psalm 8.

And we will come back to this later. If you want to look at John, look up the reference for that, you can flip open your Bible to John 8, and you can check out, indeed, the beginning and the end of John 8, is the first two lines, the last two lines right here.

[ 12 : 07 ] Okay, there's reference to it. Now we modulate to music. Now musicologically speaking, much can be examined in terms of how Bach portrayed this theater of glory.

For our purpose, I would only focus on the so-called Yishun von Nazareth chorus. Now there are a total of five appearances of this chorus, and we will examine each one of them.

And now I think it's a good idea to have access to a Bible. And so we can follow the narrative of this text in its full context.

Okay? So as we know, the Passion narrative is recorded in chapters 18, 19. Why? Because he's reading.

He will be reading. He better knows. Anyways. Now the first two appearances of this chorus occurs in the very opening, the opening scenes of the Passion, which corresponds to chapter 18, verse 1 to 8.

[13:29] When Jesus came forward to the crowd, he asked, whom do you seek? And they answered, And they answered.

Okay, that's what I answered. I wish you'd hear them sing.

And Jesus said to them, what? Ego, Amy. Second Greek. Oh, actually, I used it before, right?

Yes. And asked them again, whom do you seek? And they answered again. Now, those of you who have very sharp ears and good memory can probably catch that these two are slightly different, the musical content that is.

I will highlight the differences later, and it will become important as our talk goes on. Okay? But two things can be noticed right here.

[14:47] First of all, the brevity and the distinctness of the Yesu von Nasroth chorus helps the listener to recall them. Very recallable. You can probably hum this thing right away, right?

Yeah. Secondly, the juxtaposition of this chorus, which identifies the historical personish, Jesus of Nasroth, is...

Something can go wrong. Sorry. I missed a question. Sorry.

Okay. Anyways. I meant to click the laser pointer. Here you go. Anyways. This title is in reference to the humanity of Christ.

And, of course, it's just opposing the defined claim of Christ in Ego Amy, right in the center. So, this positioning really engenders the antagonistic role of the choruses.

[15:58] That is, these choruses represent the force of opposition. Now, the third appearance, which I accidentally spilled out. Yes.

A lot can go wrong. The third setting is set to the context of John 18, verse 31. When, I believe, is when the religious authority tried to push all the all the dirty work onto Pontius Pilate by refusing to take Jesus' re-app a lot.

Anyways. This one is probably a little harder to track its similarity to the original musical master of chorus because it's rather highly elaborated and expanded.

Okay? But here it is. Here it is. here it is. So, this has a lot with two and to roll together, uh, awesome, to see a lot of giving your odd image every like all So that was appearance number 3. And appearance number 4 corresponds to John 18 verse 4, when the crowd demands for Barabbas.

[17:50] That was appearance 4. Now the final appearance of the force of antagonism occurs when the Judaic religious establishment finally saw their soul.

We have no king but Caesar, they said. So what about Yahweh?

What about the promised Messiah, the son of David? This is the statement, this is the punchline that put Christ on the cross.

Right there. Important to remember that. Now as you may have noticed, all 5 appearances are somewhat varied.

Not only that they are melodically and gesturally varied, they are also in different keys.

[19:01] Now this is where I get a little musicologically involved. Please bear with me here. And I ask for your forgiveness.

It's easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission. I learned from Reverend Ganser. I believe I'm recording this.

But anyways. If we trace the tonal progression through the 5 choruses, you can see a pattern of alternating ascending 4ths and descending 3rds.

Or if you look at the 5th and ascending 6th. It doesn't matter. Which is the progression through the keys of G minor, C minor, A minor, D minor and B minor.

So those of you who are musically adept should be able to reckon that I'm advocating an overall ascending progression through the tonal centers, through the choruses.

[ 20 : 11 ] Now for the rest of you, don't worry about the jargon. Just listen as I hopefully can demonstrate on the keyboard.

To what I actually mean here. Ok? So here, I'm sorry Olaf, I'm going to pound with your ears. So, the first chorus is right here.

So that's the first chorus. Remember. It's right here. Second chorus. What's the difference? What's the major difference? It's right here. Right here. Start right here. The second chorus is right here.

Ok? So in here, there's a little difference. It's higher up. Third chorus is a little tricky.

That's a little stinger. Ok? So in here, there's a little difference. It's higher up.

[ 21 : 09 ] Ok? Third chorus is a little tricky, that's a little stinger because it doesn't start right on the chord that we call home. Right on the chord.

So we started here, we went to here, and now we are here. Okay, and now the next one, when they ask for far bus, it will be right here.

I'll try that again. Right here.

And the last one, we have no king but Caesar they said, will be right here. Okay, so to recap, we actually started from here, and we made it, we climbed the ladder, and we ended on the fifth chorus right here.

We started right here, and we finished right here. Okay, so we started right here, we made it through the path, here, to here, then to here, then we ended right here.

[ 22 : 37 ] Okay? Now, if you could hear the ladder be inclined, that's good for you. If you still couldn't hear the ladder be inclined, then just take the path for it.

I don't think I could explain it even better. I'm so sorry. But anyhow, I'm illustrating an overall upward motion, which leads towards the most central event of the passion.

Help me with my German. S is Fulbrot. It is finished on the cross. The most central event in the passion setting.

Corresponding to John chapter 19, 24 to 30. Provided that there are a considerable amount of material, both textually and musically, in between, it having Koenig and S is Fulbrot.

It behooves me to identify the two devices which Bach employs to ensure that the listener maintains the continuity required to catch this.

[ 23 : 49 ] So, first of all, the first device, a scriptural device or literary device, is the fifth chorus right here, if having Koenig, as I mentioned, is what put Christ on the cross.

And, as this is for Brot, it is that on the cross. So, there's this sort of causal effect to it.

There's a causal effect to it. The second is the tonal device. The fifth chorus, which is the end point of this ascent, of this ladder, is in B minor.

And guess what key is our important aria? B minor. So, what you hear is, this is where the fifth chorus is.

And the start of the armit that we are concerned with starts like what?

[ 25 : 09 ] Something like that. In the same key. So, to make sure that the listener can recognize that the central event right here connects to the fifth chorus right there.

Okay? So now, we explain the continuity. Now, what proof is there that is the central event? Yes, there is proof.

The centrality of this aria, and look up aria in the sheet. Know what it is? Okay? You know what aria means?

It's evident in its placement within the chiasm. Chiasm. Yes. There's a chiasm here.

If you know Daryl Johnson, he's very big on chiasms. Anyways, yes, as it's for a rock, it's right here in the middle of the chiasm. Alright?

[ 26 : 08 ] The innermost place of the chiastic structure. And by occupying this space, Bach effectively communicates to his audience that this aria is the central moment of his piece.

And the next slide, I'm just going to take these two sections, and I'm going to pull out the text.

Okay? The text is going to come out.

Okay? The text for those two sections. And why did I point out these texts? Because, to further reinforce his points, Bach would draw the listener's attention to the aria by repeating the first line of the aria in the resititif.

This usually doesn't happen. It usually goes resititif. If the line is here, it's not repeated in the aria, where the character spills something in motion.

If it's in the aria, it's not in the last noun of the resititif. It's either or. Common practice is either or. This is not common practice. So, Bach is deliberate here. Let the narrator go resititif, sort of quasi recite the scriptural text.

[ 27 : 36 ] You recognize the scriptural text. And when it hits, as is programmed. And when the seer comes out and sings the emotion of this last section, the first line is, as is programmed.

It catches, really, let the listener zeroes in. Alright? So, here is that. And, it is a very beautiful piece. I cannot resist, but have it all played. So, just sit back and play. that is otherwise.

ierra Nob Withere Mother Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 29 : 37 ] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 32 : 07 ] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Bach says the text with much the hero of Judah triumph and ends the strife or ends the battle. and it is set in the key of B major the brightest and most optimistic key in Baroque aesthetics for example think about Joy to the World think about Alleluia Chorus they're both in B major the brightest key in Baroque aesthetic now let's put everything in perspective right here Bach worked up to the central aria through an ascending tonal progression through unfolded in the five appearances of the Jesu Pham Nasrith Chorus and at the heart of this very important aria the heart of the middle section of this all-important aria is this triumphal text set to militaristic music and you have down here in brackets still concitato and also in your sheet it is associated with battle music so militaristic music and militaristic orchestration now Bach went on record to say the instrument in the ends the viola, the gamba pretty much quote-unquote extinct seven-string instrument played like a cello a little bit smaller frets in between there's a fretboard and Bach went on record to say that it is the most heathony instrument and the violins unfortunately I'm a violin player but fortunately Bach sees it as sees the violins and the strings as the earthly instrument he went on record to say that so he used the earthly instrument to portray the imagery of a battle which is the earthly event so he set this text at the heart of the aria with militaristic music and orchestration steel concertado and violins in the most optimistic key so something is going on right here okay now in John 12 31 to 33

[ 36 : 41 ] Jesus said now is the judgment of this world now will the ruler of this world be cast out and I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself and John comments he said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die so what is finished the lifting up of Christ on the cross now compare compare that with the book of Numbers chapter 21 8 to 9 the bronze serpent being lifted up on the pole okay the cross being lifted up is portrayed by the ascending motion ascending motion the ascending tonal motion through the five choruses and it is and it is his death on the cross it is finished that the rulers of the world be cast out hence unless a grain falls into the earth and dies it will remain alone but if it dies it bears much fruit the the triumph from the major middle section of

S is programmed erupts into the militant still concitato on the words with might the hero of Judah triumph and ends the strife here John's sense of victory is so vividly projected as to become a palpable reality therefore in the apparently bleak moment at the cross when it seems as though the forces of opposition which is impersonated by the choruses prevailed Christ is lifted up and became the ultimate victor that is why in our aria it started and ended in the minor key in the middle section it's optimistic major key it's minor key to portray that the scene is apparently very bleak it's apparently hopeless but the heart of it at the very center of it

Christ won the battle on the cross and I believe this idea Mel Gibson captured very well on his passion movie in Christ's arrest while he was trial flogged tortured humiliated even when he was crucified the devil impersonated was I think was in the bosom of the high priest smiling and right

after Christ said it is finished you hear this cry of defeat by the devil he lost on the cross so it is by this victory that Christ is glorified on the cross so what theology of atonement is Bach expressing in his passion setting musicologically speaking Christus

Victor makes the most sense Christus Victor refer to your sheet with might the hero of triumph having been lifted up on the cross triumphs and casts out the ruler of this world and closes the battle and it is finished the language of silencing the enemy and the avenger is definitely present in Psalms 8 if you remember it's the very opening chorus in which the entire passion setting is based on but however although the concept of Christus Victor is consistent with our observation historical context sets otherwise it does not support our reading since the 16th to 18th century Lutheran does not readily intuit the cross of Christ as Christus Victor they are big on penal substitution I conferred with experts on that namely Dr.

[ 41 : 29 ] Jim Packer nevertheless regardless of whether Bach is expressing the theology of Christus Victor the motifs of glorification which is the ends of atonement see Romans 8 30 is evident throughout the passion Jesus' step on the cross is the glorification of the name of God and on that note I shall close with the famous hymn in Philippians 2 though he Christ Jesus was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but he made himself nothing taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of man and being found in human form he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on the cross therefore

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above all names so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father and certainly Christ is glorified by Johannes de Baustin Bach in his masterpiece The Johannes Passion and now I shall take the cue from our very beloved Dr.

Jim Packer to quit my monologue and engage into dialogue cast Thank you.

Did he have a group of thinkers around him, whom he could work with, to understand the depths that he brought forward?

Okay, first of all, Bach was working in Leipzig, the largest Lutheran church in the country, and he was cantered there.

[ 44 : 17 ] And also, we have his library, like his personal library collection, and he had theological books, a lot of them, and they're all marked up. So, either he studied on his own, or he studied with others, theologians, we don't know.

He definitely had the resources with him, the biggest church around. And he went to the same university as Luther. So, he definitely had the resources to do that with others, and alone.

We don't know whether he did it alone or together, but we definitely know that he had access to understanding all that theology, and signs that he had dove into that, all the other books have arrived up.

At that time, did the people attending the church, or how much did the people attending the church, the services, understand all the depths of the geniuses of Jesus Bach?

That's a very hard thing to answer. I mean, I'm, okay, this is all scholarly speculation. We just don't know unless we have a time machine. But we know that the lower class definitely doesn't know.

[ 45 : 38 ] And actually, the lower class in the back of the church couldn't hear that thing when it's performed. But the upper class citizens, they are educated.

They go to service every week, and every week there's a cantata. So, they should be musically more sensitive than the average person we know today.

Just the upper echelon, okay? Now, whether or not they understood all this imagery, all the allegories, Bach is, or I'm advocating Bach is communicating right here.

I really don't know. I think they may have a hunch. I mean, when I play that middle aria section, it doesn't take a lot to catch the attention of all of you, right?

You know that something went on right there. Now, to make that extra connection to understand the theological death, that extra step, it's not unconceivable, but I just don't know.

[ 46 : 47 ] There's just no way we wouldn't know. I would guess yes. But even if the audience doesn't get it, it doesn't mean that Bach didn't base his work on it. I mean, he must work with some bases, right?

So, questions? This is a bit of an aside as far as the audience goes, but from 7025, a new style was being introduced. Like Bach's own sons called him an old pigtail, because he was writing the old

style.

Yes, absolutely. So, some might have been, in terms of style, some might have been thinking, we have to listen to this stuff again, all this new stuff. Yes, I know.

He's talking about the Enlightenment, the new still gallant, the new gallant style that's prevalent in the lower middle classes in Italy, started all off as satire, and really gained popularity all around Europe.

Still gallant started all in the secular world. So, in the sacred setting of the church, maybe or maybe not.

[ 47 : 59 ] A sacred setting of the church, there could be a... It's not too big of the tail end.

It's not too big of it. I'm not denying it, because Telemann is a big gallant style guy. So, yeah.

Bach is seen to be that way, and he's very stubborn about it. Very insistent. I won't say stubborn, but very insistent about writing in the old style. Jason, there was a marvelous presentation.

Thank you. So much for that. Thank you. I love the St. John Bashan, and I've heard it many times, but I learned from this something quite new. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Yeah. In all great art, the artist, whatever the form of art, seems to keep something for themselves.

[ 49 : 03 ] That... Would you say that Bach, in any way at all, are you discovering anything that he's kept himself as you've studied these things, that not everything is revealed from the manuscript, not everything is revealed from the conductor, not everything is revealed from the instruments themselves.

So, do you find that there are new discoveries being made? It's a great work of art.

And, do you think that Bach's private meditations are all covered within such a piece of music, in that sense, of his emotions, or whatever?

You understand what I'm saying? Yeah, yeah, I understand what you're saying. Is there anything with you... You know, composers... Okay. Even if a composer doesn't self-report, this is what I've done, it's usually not reliable.

And... Yeah. And we have a lot of... Even the contemporary composers, it's very questionable whenever they make a claim that this is how things are done.

[ 50 : 30 ] So, it is our job, as a music academic, to tease this thing out of heart. Now, whether or not it is really communicating that idea, it's really another topic.

Now, does the passion, does the great piece cover all the all of Bach's meditation? I cannot say cover all of it in a piece, but he wrote so many pieces, he was demanded to produce a cantata once per week.

Now, production doesn't mean he have to write them out on his own. He can copy or rearrange them.