



Johann Sebastian Bach. Portrait property of William H. Scheide, Princeton, NJ.

Performing the Passion: J. S. Bach and the Gospel of John

Margot E. Fassler
Introduction by Kay Kaufman Shelemay

This presentation, cosponsored by the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, was given at the 1922nd Stated Meeting, held at the House of the Academy on December 12, 2007. It included musical performances by vocalists Abigail Haynes Lennox, soprano, and Ian Howell, counter-tenor, as well as clips from the film *Performing the Passion: J.S. Bach and the Gospel according to John*, featuring the Yale Schola Cantorum, directed by Simon Carrington, and the Yale Collegium Players, led by Robert Mealy. The film is coproduced by Margot Fassler and Jacqueline Richard. In the demonstration, the performers were led by Robert Bolyard and accompanied by Avi Stein on the organ.



Kay Kaufman Shelemay

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Introduction

In his impressive biography of the composer Johann Sebastian Bach, musicologist Christoph Wolff has noted that “the complex genesis and transformation of Bach’s first Leipzig Passion – one is tempted to speak of St. John “Passions” – demonstrate a degree of continuing freshness, originality, and experimental radiance that makes the work stand out in many ways”¹ I would like to borrow Christoph Wolff’s description of Bach, as “the Learned Musician,” and apply it to our speaker tonight, who is a very learned musicologist. It is clear that Professor Margot Fassler has exhibited “freshness, originality, and experimental radiance” throughout her distinguished career. That Professor Fassler will guide us tonight through one of Bach’s most complicated compositions sure-

ly marks an experimental turn in her work. Let me trace a few of the highlights of Margot Fassler’s professional path, scholarly contributions, and leadership across several fields of knowledge.

Trained at Cornell University, where she received her Ph.D. in 1983 in medieval studies with a specialization in music history, Margot Fassler is today the Robert S. Tangeman Professor of Music History and Liturgy at Yale University. She has taught at Yale since 1994, when she was wooed away from Brandeis University back to Yale, where she had earlier spent five years as an assistant professor. Margot Fassler’s departure from the ‘Hub of the Universe’ left a great hole in the Boston musicological community. It had long been clear that Fassler’s work crossed disciplinary boundaries in exciting new ways – for instance, in 1985, when she was awarded the Elliot Prize from the Medieval Academy

¹Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 296.

of America for the best first article on a medieval subject, titled “Who Was Adam of St. Victor? – The Evidence of the Sequence Manuscripts.”²

Fassler’s epic monograph (478 pages!) *Gothic Song: Victorine Sequences and Augustinian Reform in Twelfth-Century Paris* was published by Cambridge University Press in 1993. In 1994, this extraordinary book that brought together musical, liturgical, historical, and memory studies garnered the Otto Kinkeldey Award from the American Musicological Society. In 1997, *Gothic Song* won yet another award, the John Nicholas Brown Prize from the Medieval Academy of America; the book will appear in a second edition next year.

Professor Fassler has edited several other important volumes. *The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages*, co-edited with Rebecca Baltzer in 2000 and published by Oxford University Press, received one of the two honorable mention awards from the American Association of Publishers in the Religion and Philosophy category. Professor Fassler has also edited *Musicians for the Churches, Reflections on Formation and Vocation*, which appeared in 2001, and *Psalm in Community: Jewish and Christian Textual, Liturgical, and Artistic Traditions*, co-edited with Harold Attridge in 2003. We are awaiting her next monograph, *Making History: The Liturgical Framework of Time and the Virgin of Chartres*, forthcoming from Yale University Press. Two other books are in progress: a volume on *Hildegard von Bingen: Approaching the Composer as Theologian in the Twelfth Century*, and a monograph on *Music in the Middle Ages*. All of this in addition to some thirty-five major articles and reviews that Professor Fassler has published or currently has in press, spanning topics relating to music, liturgy, and sacred history, in the Middle Ages and beyond.

Lest you think that Professor Fassler left Boston for New Haven in order to devote every spare moment to producing this extraordinary list of publications, you should know that she went to Yale to direct the Institute of Sacred Music. She occupied this position with brilliance and energy until 2004, while simultaneously holding joint appoint-

ments in Yale’s School of Music, Divinity School, and Department of Music, and is affiliated with the Program in Medieval Studies. In 2001, Professor Fassler took on the role of Principal Investigator for a grant from the Lilly Endowment to support a project titled “Experiments with a New Model for Scholarship, Teaching, and Learning in Liturgical Practice and the Theological Disciplines.” During these years, too, Professor Fassler held a fellowship from the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies.

Tonight we will get a glimpse of Margot Fassler’s ability to apply her historical, musical, and liturgical knowledge to a composition and historical epoch outside her medieval music specialization. We will also get a glimpse of Professor Fassler’s recent work in media beyond print: the world of film with which she is increasingly engaged. In recent years, Professor Fassler has also produced and directed performances of early dramas, including “The Play of Adam” and works of Hildegard von Bingen.

Music, history, and theology elucidated through film and live performance thus await us this evening. It brings to mind the epigraph to Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Little Organ Book* (1717), which has been translated: “For the glory of the highest God alone, and for my neighbour to learn from.” Tonight we are the fortunate neighbors of the American Academy, who will learn from Professor Margot Fassler as she speaks about “Performing the Passion: J.S. Bach and the Gospel of St. John.”



Margot E. Fassler

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Sing Faster by Jon Else is one of the few documentary films made about the traditions of Western European and North American art music: it, like the use of cuts from operatic scenes found in Disney cartoons, is not made by or with scholars. Like operatic Disney cartoons, it offers a lighthearted spoof of

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high culture, a typically American stance. The stagehands lust after the Rhine maidens like modern-day Alberichs; later Brunhilde yucks it up offstage, and the real tension is in whether or not the fog machines will overproduce and choke the singers.

[Editor’s note: film clip from *Sing Faster*]

Scenes from a rehearsal in San Francisco viewed in Cambridge, Massachusetts? Not surprising. The technological changes witnessed since World War I are as dramatic as shifts from papyrus to parchment, or from horses to cars, trains, and planes. These transformations have been gradual, until we

² *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 37 (2) (1984): 233 – 269.

come to the Internet; there the changes are upon us so quickly that we must engage with them every day. Musicologists, like all scholars in the humanistic disciplines, are coming to terms with JSTOR and the ever-growing lists of audio databases for our classes, and students who offer us PowerPoint presentations rather than papers. As for media, those of us in music now regularly publish in conjunction with clips on YouTube or through podcasts of performances; Naxos, the most important of the audio databases, will surely include video in the next few years. I teach a course on music in the documentary and I use the database Folkstreams.net, organized by Tom Davenport. In a presentation a few years ago, composer Libby Larson discussed “the concert hall that fell asleep and woke up as a car radio.” The car, she claimed, is where most people experience music. Today recent developments provoke a related query:

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“What if libraries fell asleep and woke up as laptops?” Technology blesses with one hand and curses with the other. One of its blessings, at least for ethnomusicologists and musicologists and their students, may be the use of film in research, teaching, and scholarly productions.

Film goes against the grain of the car radio concert hall; of performances without performers; of music that can only be heard, and not seen; of music that can be intensely edited from what it was when a human being originally sang or played it. Of course performances of music on film can be manipulated. But no matter how extreme the edits, what you see of a filmed performance usually involves bodies, mouths, hands, faces, feet. During the course of the twentieth century, the technology of recordings and radio disembodied music; producers of rock DVDs have led the fight against this trend.

The greatest visual aid for understanding how a piece of music works and its emotional content remains the expert performer’s face and body. One thing that will not work in film (I know this from painful experience) is audio that is out of sync with the visual. The human connection is, fortunately, still too powerful to allow it. When Dan Stepner, first violinist of the Lydian String Quartet, gives us a downbeat at a crucial structural place in the piece, we know it; he tells us with his body where we are in the work, even if we have never studied sonata form. The over-produced sounds of contemporary recordings, on the other hand, can sound perfect, and the musician’s effort effortless. The possibilities for fooling the public are endless, as witnessed by the recent case of pianist Joyce Hatto and her now-notorious spouse and spin doctor.

Our project films music, both in concert and ritual settings, for the purpose of bringing embodied music into the classroom, a place where it is too often missing. Among our several goals, I mention two that particularly relate to this film *Performing the Passion*.¹ First, we engage with problems of music and music making in our society, through the voices of people who both know and care about the issues, especially in the realm of sacred music. Second, we experiment with what happens when students are taught by their peers. A new pedagogical dimension opens up when we bring high-quality student performances into the classroom, and students hear people their own age talk about what they do. We involve our students as performers, researchers, community leaders, production assistants, and filmmakers. Of course, it’s all the better when we can bring together the performers and the authorities on the works we teach, but few of us have the resources to do this on a regular basis. Our tiny studio, with its simple equipment, is a laboratory, dedicated to the study of the contemporary practice of sacred repertoires and connected in many ways to courses I teach in sacred music and documentary film. Film is the product of our work. We are especially attentive to the power of filmmaking to engage students

¹Relevant clips from *Performing the Passion* can be found in the order mentioned in this article on the website of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music: <http://www.yale.edu/ism>.

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with local faith communities and in fieldwork that requires close attention to group dynamics and the leadership qualities in musicians who lead congregational chant and song.

We have made films about Gregorian chant within a monastic community and about styles of psalm singing in the Western Christian tradition, now distributed by the Society of Biblical Literature. We are engaged in filming a Coptic cantor from Jersey City, New Jersey, and gospel music in an African American church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Today we will share clips from a film of a performance of J. S. Bach’s *St. John Passion*, the 1725 version, that we are just finishing. You will have a sneak preview, and you may notice a few things that still need work. This is not the final version, but it is close.

When planning the performance, Simon Carrington and Markus Rathey chose the 1725 version of Bach’s *St. John* because it is slightly more dramatic than Bach’s other versions of the same work; as a result, the theology is somewhat different and distinct. Background study began well over a decade ago at a session on “Anti-Jewish Themes in Western Sacred Repertoires” at an annual meeting of the American Musicological Society. In those days, scholars were talking about revising musical works or not performing Bach’s *Passions* at all anymore. I argued in this session for performances that unfolded within the company of Biblical scholars and musicologists – Jewish and Christian – who were equipped to deal with hard issues. Fifteen years ago, I had no idea how I would bring that off. Today, our film attempts to do this. We study this challenging piece with the help of Biblical scholars, performers, and musicologists, whose comments punctuate the scenes. In addition to clips from the film, we will present live perform-

ances by two of the soloists – then students at Yale, now graduated – who explain their ideas within the film. Colleagues who worked with me on the film are here, too: coproducer Jacqueline Richard and musicologist Markus Rathey.

Bach's setting of the Passion is part of a long tradition of chanting scriptural texts during the liturgical time just before Easter that depict Jesus's suffering and death as found in the three Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – and in the Gospel of John, which is considered the latest of the four canonic

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Gospels and stems from a somewhat different, although related, tradition. In our film, which is 1 hour and 13 minutes long, we work with difficult issues in concentrated ways, allowing the visuals to speak with power and efficiency and offering material for discussion and research projects. The special features section of the DVD will include several longer selections – chorales, arias, and choruses without any cuts – as in the performance. In the film itself, we have adopted a visual grammar that we hope will make points in richly textured ways. We have several kinds of footage: interviews of both scholars and performers; footage from a rehearsal at school; footage from the dress rehearsal in St. Mary's Church, where the performance took place; and footage of the actual performance by the Yale Schola Cantorum, an all-student group conducted by Simon Carrington (the Yale Collegium Players, a town and gown group conducted by Robert Mealy, joined in the dress rehearsal).

When interviewees are talking about the music, we try to use rehearsal footage to underscore points, with students in street clothes; when we offer longer "cameos," we generally use concert footage, proclaiming that we are being quiet at that point, that the

music itself needs room to carry the ideas, and that the viewers should focus attention on the embodied music, just as the audience did on the night of the actual performance. You will see examples, including one that moves directly from Simon Carrington conducting at school to the performance itself. By cutting back and forth, we demonstrate that behind every performance stand hours and hours of work, reflective and scholarly as well as physical.

In addition to pictures of historic scores as well as modern scores with the markings of the performers within them, we have enriched the visual language of the film through use of engravings from the very Bibles that people in Bach's congregation would have read from at home, offering a glimpse of the visual imaginations of biblical events found in audiences of the time. Thanks to the kindness of Concordia College, we have been able to use photographs of Bach's own Bible as well, with his annotations in the margins.

There are three major "characters" in Bach's *Passion*, and the first is by far the most complex: 1) "the people," 2) "the Evangelist," John himself, who tells the story and brings other biblical characters to life in recitative, and 3) Jesus, who also sings in the same style as the Evangelist John, allowing for emphasis on the declaimed biblical text. In the conventions of composing settings of the *Passion*, the Evangelist is a tenor and Jesus is a bass.

In editing the film, we worked the hardest to depict "the people," which is a complicated idea in Bach's setting. They sing as a group in many guises, first of all in the Lutheran chorales, simple four-part hymns that all of Bach's audience would have known and recognized. Second, "the people" are found in the large, concertized choruses that in part employ melodies and texts Bach borrowed from the chorale tradition and other liturgical works known to the Lutheran audiences. He wrote this version of the *St. John* when he was especially engaged with the choral cantata, and this interest shows in the opening chorus, "*O Mensch beweine*." By using both of these materials throughout his setting, Bach brings the audience into the *Passion*: they are there, they comment, they are both the historic crowds of Jews and onlookers as well as the Lutheran congregation. The arias, too, frequently relate to the emotions and

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ideas found in the crowds, but through the reflective voice of an individual. Bach, in his extraordinary creativity, makes the point by sharing musical material between arias and crowd scenes in the *St. John Passion*.

The opening chorus of the 1725 version is one of the major differences between this and the 1724/1749 version. It is a powerful opening gesture based on the old Lutheran hymn "*O Mensch beweine*" ("Oh People, Bewail"), a text and tune that everyone would have known. In his 2006 concert program notes, Markus Rathey says that it was part of the style to lay out major thematic concerns in the first movement of a *Passion* setting, and Bach proclaims here the charge of sinfulness, one that demonstrates the need for the redemption that will ultimately resolve the long struggle lying ahead.

[Editor's note: film clip from *Performing the Passion*]

Bach creates arias that allow points of repose, moving us from the group to the individual member of the crowd, and pinpoints emotional states through these solos. We can take as an example the character of Peter, the disciple who denies Christ three times as Jesus predicted he would. Peter does not walk around onstage; we only see him in the chorus for a second when he sings his one line, but his emotional story is told through the music, first by the Evangelist and then in the guise of the Lutheran believer who denies Jesus, who will not confess who He is, and who is in need of redemption as a result of his failure and his sin.

The way in which Peter's character was developed is summed up through the soprano aria "*Ich folge dir gleichfalls mit freudigen schritten*." The dramatically brilliant piece shows Peter's inner emotionality. This sad love

song, as Markus Rathey puts it in an interview, is hopeful at first, but the B part of the aria contains a chromatic, upward climb, which is devilishly hard to sing: the naive Peter, perhaps, does not yet suspect in these foreshadowing moments that he is doomed to repeated denial rather than to joyful following. So Peter, so too the believer who starts out thinking he can make it on his or her own, but who will not, and cannot, and must rather be redeemed. Bach takes music from this aria that represents Peter's struggles and failures and reemploys it in crowd scenes that show the Jews crying for Jesus's death and insisting that He not be called their king. Through this skillful reuse, Peter is in the midst of the crowd denying, and so are the Christian believers he represents.

[Editor's note: film clip from *Performing the Passion* followed by a performance by soloist Abigail Haynes Lennox, soprano]

On some level all music belongs to all people, no matter what the belief system may be.

Every documentary film builds tension, and our film, which follows the structure of Bach's work, has an additional tension that his does not. We are deeply concerned with the ways in which audiences today hear this piece. The scholars – some are Jewish or Christian, and some are not practitioners within either faith tradition – are not identified by their affiliations. We thought about identifying them and decided to leave it ambiguous. But it is clear that they have different viewpoints and that they speak from the authority of their disciplines. Viewers could figure out with simple research that Wendy Heller is a cantor as well as a musicologist, and that A. J. Levine is a practicing Jew who teaches the New Testament in a Divinity School and was a major spokesperson concerning the anti-Jewish content of Mel Gibson's film on the Passion. Michael Marissen emerges as a scholar who has concentrated most of his work on the anti-Jewishness of stock repertory, having turned his sights most recently on Handel's *Messiah*. Each scholar provides his or her own biography

for the film, and it is interesting to hear what they say. What would you want to know, and what would you want your students to know? Does it matter? That in itself is a worthwhile question, and our film asks as many questions as it answers. [The idea that Jews were killers of Christ has been denied repeatedly by many Christian denominations in recent times, and some members of the audience had wanted us to say this more explicitly in the film; I came away from the presentation wishing the point had been made even more strongly than it is.]

In the film, the conversation begins with the work scholars have done on the anti-Jewishness of John's Gospel, for this is the text Bach received. The nature of the fourth gospel is studied with some care. We then move to Bach's treatment of the text: it is not an easy subject either. Marissen and others posit that Bach actually softened the eighteenth-century stance regarding the treatment of Jews in comparable works; most importantly he has turned the guilt onto the Lutheran congregation who, like Peter, denies who Jesus is. Prior to the selection we will watch, A. J. Levine says that the Gospel of John is a work of art, as Bach's setting is a work of art, and that what one thinks of it depends on many factors.

[Editor's note: film clip from *Performing the Passion*]

Jesus's death in the Gospel of John is far removed from the scenes of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*; the theology expressed in John's Gospel puts Jesus in control of the end of his life, directing the scenes himself and realizing that he is the Lamb of God who goes willingly to die in order to redeem. The emphasis that Bach places on sin in the opening is borne out in the scene of Jesus's crucifixion and in what follows. We devote one portion of the scene to discussion of the reasons why excessive violence is inappropriate to the narrative, especially as found in the Gospel of John. In this text, Jesus shows no weakness; he dies only when all is accomplished, and he makes the decision himself. The effect his death will have upon the believer is conflicted, and this is established in the moving aria "*Es ist vollbracht*" ("It is finished").

[Editor's note: film clip from *Performing the Passion* followed by a performance by soloist Ian Howell, countertenor]

When we walk home after a performance of a major work, even one that troubles us deeply, there is also a voice of hope in the midst of questions that still remain.

Constructing the end of the film posed special difficulties for us. The conclusion of Bach's *Passion* is lengthy and complicated: much material unfolds long after the dramatic climax, and so too in our film. This is not the way films are conventionally structured. Usually, after the climax, the resolution follows quickly and the end immediately thereafter. Bach ended the *Passion* in three ways at the Vespers service in Leipzig on Good Friday, 1725: first, with a lullaby-like chorus that sings to the holy bones of the dead and that comforts the sorrow of the individual; second, through a choral setting of the German *Agnus Dei*, transporting the believer to liturgical time; and third, as was convention, by the singing of a sixteenth-century Passion motet, which pushes beyond the boundaries of the familiar. We wanted to be faithful to this, and so included long sections from both choruses and the complete motet, trusting that by the end the audience will be ready to listen and understand that the music is the star of our film. We also needed to tie up themes that Bach didn't: theological ideas and the feelings of the performers – our work is a play within a play.

The clip you will hear includes only the last two pieces. The first is the Lutheran *Agnus Dei* (*Lamb of God*), not found in other versions of the *Passion*, but especially appropriate to the *St. John Passion* of 1725. Through this music, the *Passion* is lifted out and into the Mass, where the liturgical celebration continues to make the theological points throughout the church year. The resolution has a meaning outside the feast and in the week-to-week liturgical life of the church, a point underscored through the appearance of the performers who played Jesus and John singing within the chorus, mingling the holy with the commonplace.

Then, we end our film, as Bach would have ended a performance of the *St. John Passion*, with the traditional Passion motet by the sixteenth-century composer Jacob Handl. This motet takes the listener to a land that is sonically far removed from anything else in the entire film, in the entire setting of the Passion. Eighteenth-century Lutherans would have experienced this piece as a different style, as surely as we do. The music creates a sense of the eternal appropriate for the immensity of the themes treated and resolved at the close. The individual solos of the arias, the busy independent voices of the choruses, even the moving, often piquant harmonies of the chorale settings are resolved within the texture of this earlier counterpoint. The characters dissolve; the instruments fall completely silent: no individual sound stands out in the homophony of this motet, and the sharp dissonances of voice leading so apparent in Bach's harmonic language are replaced by an equally robust but utterly different texture and practice, one reflecting a far-removed age and the gentle turning of the spheres.

The complexities of living in a society where many faith traditions co-exist, alongside a painful history, are central not only to American culture but to teaching and learning about music from the past, especially pieces like the *St. John Passion* of J. S. Bach. Performance practice is not only about which reed to choose or how to hold the bow. It illustrates the importance of music and historical musicology in trying to understand major religious topics from the past, especially when performance is the intention. On some level all music belongs to all people, no matter what the belief system may be. When we walk home after a performance of a major work, even one that troubles us deeply, there is also a voice of hope in the midst of questions that still remain.

[Editor's note: film clip from *Performing the Passion*] ■

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St. John Passion

(1725 version)

Johann Sebastian Bach

1685 – 1750

9. Aria (Soprano) *Abigail Haynes Lennox*

Ich folge dir gleichfalls mit freudigen Schritten
Und lasse dich nicht,
Mein Leben, mein Licht.
Befördre den Lauf
Und höre nicht auf,
Selbst an mir zu ziehen, zu schieben, zu bitten.

*I will follow you likewise with joyful steps
and will not let you [go],
My Life, my light.
Pave the way,
and do not stop
drawing, shoving, imploring me yourself.*

30. Aria (Alto) *Ian Howell*

Es ist vollbracht!
O Trost vor die gekränkten Seelen!
Die Trauernacht
Läßt nun die letzte Stunde zählen.
Der Held aus Juda siegt mit Macht
Und schließt den Kampf.
Es ist vollbracht!

*It is accomplished!
O comfort for the afflicted souls!
The night of mourning
now counts the final hour.
The hero from Judah triumphs with power
and brings the battle to a close.
It is accomplished!*

Translation: Michael Marissen