J. S. Bach (1685-1750) overshadowed his predecessors in Baroque, and his influence continued through the classical period to the present day. With Mendelssohn's famous performance of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* in 1829, the Bach revival gained momentum in the public sphere. But the *St. John Passion* enjoyed no real interest until relatively recently. The whole work has been repeatedly criticized for a lack of form (overall musical conception, order of movements, and design of key areas). CPE Bach who first received the scores after J.S. Bach's death even referred to it as a "pasticio Passion." The *St. John Passion* certainly deserves more respect for its superb music as well as its effective religious message and especially powerful dramatic effect.

The *Saint John Passion* was first performed on Good Friday, 1723 (or 1724) in Leipzig, Germany. Bach did not prepare this passion for publication or posterity, but only for performances directly under his supervision. As a result, no single authoritative source or final version exists, unlike many of Bach's more famous works. Scholars had to collect miscellaneous parts and partial scores that survived from its multiple performances (five versions with substantial differences). Editors still have to contend with monumental musical decisions to yield a consistent performance. Some conductors, such as Helmuth Rilling, recorded all the surviving passion movements in each incarnation to reconstruct Bach's different performances and conceptions, as best as possible.

This passion story relates Christ's arrest to his crucifixion, and it should be performed during Holy Week. The tradition of singing the Passion story developed from Middle Ages to Eighteenth century. One soloist chanted the Gospel while one or more other voices represented the protagonists. Choir sang words of groups: the mobs, the four soldiers, and the priests. Protestants gradually expanded the genre to include chorales and, eventually, arias. *Summa passionis* interweave all the gospels in a polyphonic setting, but following popular religious attitudes of personal piety in eighteenth-century Germany, Bach's *oratorio passions* include poetic texts not from the Gospels that refer to the believer with "Ich". Biblical passages still maintain their priority. The narrative also follow a particular author (in this case, Saint John). Peter's weeping and the tearing of the temple curtain, however, are borrowed from Saint Matthew.

Bach composed his cantatas and passions for worship services, not concert performance. For this reason, the passions are divided into two parts, one prior and one following the sermon. Bach's principle aim was to paint the passion story vividly for the congregation and summon their emotions, so that each congregant would learn from the biblical lesson. In his view, music in its highest purpose serves religion.

Despite being fluent in German, Bach's congregation regularly had the texts printed for them, much like Opera libretti. After all, most listeners find sung texts difficult to comprehend, even in their mother tongue. Bach took pains not only to set the text fluently but also to represent the words and action with musical effects, making sung English translations to the same notes somewhat awkward. Nevertheless, many American choirs sing in English, respecting Bach's primary, didactic purpose. Remember that the texts are rich in imagery and symbols. So, try to listen for direct word-painting in the music as well as to the general mood and expression.

Bach presents the passion texts and reflection through four methods:

(1) The narrator John ("Evangelist"), traditionally a tenor, relates the story and explains the dialogue of the other characters in recitative. Passion recitatives, like those in opera, develop the story with a quick, speech-like presentation of text while continuo (cello and organ) typically support the singer with stark and dramatic harmonies;

(2) The protagonists in the story also sing recitatives, although choruses sometimes represent them. Christ is always a bass in passion settings, and his words are written in red ink.

(3) In arias, soloists suspend the dramatic action and explore a specific mood, much like opera. For instance, in the aria "From the tangle," an alto contemplates Christ's flagellation. In "Oh, my soul," Peter weeps over the renunciation, arguably one of the most expressive arias in the repertory.

(4) Traditionally called *turbae*, choruses poignantly represent groups, such as the guards, priests, or crowds. These movements can generally be grouped into four categories: "hate", "mockery", "denial" and "crucifixion" choruses. The chorus "Let us then not cut or tear" contains striking imagery of casting of lots with repeated notes like dice rolling, emphasizing the soldiers' enthusiastic greed. With the German language, the repeated "s" and "z" sounds repeat often and quickly, like a pit of spitting snakes.

In chorales, the chorus represents the congregation of believers expressing their thoughts and emotions as they react to the story and learn lessons from the biblical passages. Chorales are adorned with lush, expressive harmonies. Although parishioners certainly knew the tunes and texts by heart, most scholars doubt that congregations would join in singing with such complicated settings.

For church choirs, Bach suggested a minimum choir of three singers per part and normally had approximately four per part. Remember that all singers were male. The upper two parts were sung by boy sopranos and altos with men presumably singing in falsetto. Soloists, the backbone of Bach's choir, most likely participated in the choral numbers as well as their solos. The standard Sunday orchestra contained 15-20 players, with approximately two string players per part. Because string instruments and oboes of the Eighteenth century produced a quieter and less brilliant tone than their modern equivalents, voices could predominate over the instruments (quite appropriately since voices present the words).

For major celebrations, Bach probably augmented the size of the choir and orchestra, but not to the magnitude of modern orchestras and choir societies. After all, Bach's counterpoint and elaborate melodies project best with smaller groups, even in larger halls. Remember that Bach's Leipzig church was approximately the size of Carnegie hall, but much taller.