

Towards a Markus-Passion

Well before the Reformation the portions of the gospels depicting the final days of the earthly life of Jesus – of his betrayal, trial and death – had become a fixture of the liturgy of Holy Week, and one, uniquely, that could have dramatic expression. The Passions (*Matthäus*, *Lukas* and *Johannes*) of Bach's great predecessor Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) each have an opening and closing four-part polyphonic chorus. Their biblical narrative is divided dramatically between an evangelist (narrator) and a four-part 'turba' (crowd) chorus. Bach expanded this compact *a cappella* form in his own Passion-setting. Often collaborating with his librettist 'Picander' (Christian Friedrich Henrici 1700-1764) – who interpolated contemplative arias in verse within the biblical text, along with familiar Lutheran chorales and new texts for opening and closing choruses – Bach elevated the dramatic Passion to conform to his own needs and imagination: his settings, with full orchestral accompaniment (less brass and timpani) becoming oratorios on an operatic scale.

In first the *Johannes-Passion* (1724) and then the grander double-choir *Matthäus-Passion* (1729), Bach was able to make this dramatic form his own. Beginning with the *Johannes*, he kept the pithy intensity of the earlier Passion tradition, while expanding the role of the chorus and adding expansive 'operatic' arias to reflect on the story. Like his predecessors' works, however, his Passions remained an integrated single work from start to finish. The *Markus-Passion* was first performed in 1731. Aside from another documented performance in 1744, it next appeared 20 years later in a posthumous inventory of Bach's manuscripts delivered to his publisher Johann Breitkopf with a number of other works by his son Carl Philip Emanuel. It then, sadly, vanished from any record.

A century later in 1873 Wilhelm Rust, one of Bach's successors in Leipzig at the Thomas Kirche, at work as an editor of the centennial (1850) Bach Gesellschaft edition, discovered not a manuscript or early edition of the *Markus*, but its instrumental incipit (listing). It contained the unusual requirement for two violas da gamba and two lutes. Suspecting that (in the absence of a manuscript or any printed music but with a copy of Picander's libretto to hand) with its unique instrumentation the music for this Passion might have been reworked from an earlier cantata, Rust was soon able to show that the *Markus* was indeed in large measure a parody of the *Trauer-Ode* (BWV 198). With an extant copy of Picander's the libretto to hand, he was able to match from this earlier work the opening and closing choruses and three of its arias as likely parodies of parallel movements. A few decades after Rust's work, a further parodied aria from *Cantata 54*, was overwhelmingly accepted as the strongest contender for the music of the aria 'Falsche Welt'.

Rust's unpublished investigations led to the first 'complete' publication in 1964 of all the known parodied movements revealing both the beauty and potential of the *Markus*. It also laid bare the considerable practical problems for performance in the manner of the *Johannes* and *Matthäus Passions* given the incomplete state of the material. Not only the huge musical-dramatic gaps of missing *recitativo* and *turba cori* – the very elements that put the genius of Bach's Passions on the level of the finest baroque opera – but in the absence of Bach's complete setting, the lop-sided order of high-voiced arias and an abundance of chorales specified in the libretto (16, which is four more than contained in the grand-scale *Matthäus*) left a stilted glimpse of this masterpiece.

Now more than sixty years later editors face two options as the starting point for a 'reconstructed' performing version of the *Markus*. Those of a first persuasion offer only the material generally agreed to have been part of the original work; others create a complete performing edition of the work, using the libretto as a template, interspersing the *Markus* material with other sources, by Bach or other composers.

But what should be done if no suitable parody material is available for the missing aria texts? How should an editor deal with the missing and essential biblical text of the recitative (the non-aria/chorale material)? Should music from parallel settings of the libretto by other composers be employed? Or should similar material from the *Johannes* and *Matthäus Passions* be reconstituted and inserted? Or should new material be composed? If we accept that the *Markus* from its inception was conceived as a 'recycling' by Bach of music from the *Trauer-Ode* and that the existing material today yields us only a portion of Bach's original, what must our guidelines be in creating a performing version? In short: -

Should the blueprint for rebuilding be solely the libretto by Picander?

Should music other than Bach's be employed?

How invasive should the editor's hand be in melding together the source-materials ?

If we assume the stance of a 'musical curator', restoring a substantially damaged object, we may take completeness as a lesser goal than the most propitious display and positioning of the existing original artefacts. In the case of the *Markus* such completeness has largely been measured by aligning parodies of arias to the Picander libretto and by supplying the essential biblical text in the form of the *recitativo* and *turba cori* conceived by Picander. Yet compositionally, Picander's text must certainly be subordinate to Bach's musical structure as bequeathed to us in the *Trauer-Ode*. Should we thus - for example - not find a way to include its middle chorus which has no obvious parallel in Picander's text? We would include it only in respect to Bach (in the musical architecture of the *Trauer-Ode* where serves as an anchor-point midway). In the absence of other musical certainty, should not Bach's hand be our first *musical* mainstay?

Understandably much effort has been spent by scholars in the search for suitable parodies for the two missing arias not accommodated by the musical text of the *Trauer-Ode* and *Cantata 54*. But what of the aesthetic, the music itself entrusted us from the *Trauer-Ode*? Instrumentally this is a unique (originally a funeral) work in Bach's oeuvre, with its 'antique' (pre-baroque) gambas and lutes, rarely used in such a thoroughgoing and concerted manner. What challenge does this imply for the restoration work musically?

If we concern ourselves solely with the exceptional music left to us by Bach, could there be any musical justification for interpolating music other than Bach's (even if such music were known to have been performed by him)? If we, for example, for the missing *recitativo* and *turba cori* dismiss the option of inserting portions from the setting of the same libretto by Reinhard Keiser (1674-1739) and limit ourselves only to importing Bach's own music, on what basis do we then supplement our existing parodied movements? Considering the mastery of Bach's dramatic hand displayed in his other two complete Passions, could anyone imagine that these lost portions of the *Markus* were or could be simply formulaic, utilitarian or otherwise predictable and thus easily replaceable – either by importing other settings of the same text or by a pastiche re-casting parallel sections of the biblical narrative from the *Johannes* and *Matthäus Passions*?

I think we must accept that what we now have, unless or until more indisputable material is found, is a musical 'torso'. The music for at least two arias is missing from the 1731 original, along with Bach's recitative-setting of all the biblical text. I am convinced equally that we must reject as folly the proposition that we could retrieve or replace Bach's original design for this significant part of the Passion by *bricolage*: cobbling together 'atomic bits', fragments of recitative, turba and chorale from various sources to fit the Picander template. With fewer arias and many more chorales than contained in his previous Passions, Bach must surely have had his own unique plan – one that perhaps did not employ all the chorales specified by Picander. We simply cannot know; but must we not assume that his final work would have shown the same genius at such design as we have come to know in his other two Passions? The present re-construction has thus been guided by the following premises: -

Text

As the symbiotic relation of the original *recitativo-turba-chorale* has vanished, and if it is accepted that this crucial element of the Passion is *not* replaceable – either by contemporary pastiche or by recycling of parallel material from the other Bach Passions or by importation of musical setting of the same text from other composers – we are left with the possibility of a dramatic production, harkening back to the earliest of Lutheran traditions, with the biblical text spoken.

Arias

In his *Markus* libretto for Bach's original Picander included six arias. Using parody, we have music, all but universally accepted, for four. For the remaining two 'Angenehmes Mordgeschrei' and 'Welt und Himmel' various possibilities for parody or pastiche/arrangement have been proposed. Musical parody for the text of 'Angenehmes Mordgeschrei' remains inconclusive, while the match drawn from *Cantata 120a* for 'Welt und Himmel' in the 1964 publication, though not authoritatively confirmed as Bach's initial choice, is appealing: not only because of a satisfactory alignment of the text and music, but also – with its virtuosic solo instrumentalist – because of its obvious association with other familiar Passion arias 'Erbarme dich' or 'Es ist vollbracht'.

With no clearly satisfactory parallel for 'Angenehmes Mordgeschrei' found to date, we move from this matter to the larger questions of balance, proportion and placement of arias. Because the template of the *Trauer-Ode* offers no bass aria, we are left with the starting point of three arias (one each for soprano, alto and tenor). Adding the parody from *Cantata 54* for 'Falsche Welt' we have a second major aria for the alto and, if we include the parody from *Cantata 120a* for 'Welt und Himmel', we have a substantial second aria for the soprano; but Bach would certainly not have left the bass voice unrepresented in a Passion. Two bass arias from other cantatas work ideally: 'Herr so du willst' after the prayer in Gethsemane (from *Cantata 73*) and 'Es ist vollbracht' (from *Cantata 159*) as a meditation immediately after the death of Jesus, the climax of the entire Passion. Although these particular arias are not part of Picander's libretto, more significantly, they fit Bach's regular scheme of balancing the four voices; and to this end a further aria for the tenor can be provided with the little-known alternative 'Erbarme dich' setting from *Cantata 55*.

Chorus and Chorale

As mentioned above, the *Trauer-Ode* provides not only an opening and closing chorus for the *Markus*, but an additional fugal chorus that, with the substitution of a (funereal) Psalm text, serves perfectly within the architecture of the Passion musically and textually as a chorus to conclude its first part. It offers the added benefit of completing the outline of an authentic musical structure conceived by Bach. Conversely, the plethora of chorales in the original text, however they might have worked in Bach's original plan, makes no musical sense when individual chorales are employed as detached musical items within the spoken text. (Their initial function gave points of punctuation within a Bach's now vanished sequence of recitative, turba and aria.) I have thus pruned their numbers drastically. However, in the manner of Bach in his cantatas and oratorios, I have included *sinfonie* at major dramatic places in both first and second parts of the Passion. These function within the flow of the spoken narrative as chorale substitutes for non-verbal dramatic effect. Similarly, at the Passion's midpoint, occupied in Bach's day by a sermon, I have offered a further optional short *sinfonia*, as an overture to the second part. Of the chorales not deleted I have consciously included both 'signature' chorales 'Petrus, der nicht denkt zurück' and 'O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden' as points of reference in the *Markus* to respectively the *Johannes* and *Mattäus* Passions.