

The aim of these four Holy Week meditations, which I have called 'Music of the Passion' is to give enough background on four relatively short pieces of music that throw some light on aspects of the suffering of Jesus, so that they can help us to enter into those experiences. They are not meant to be teachings, let alone fully worked-out theology, but they are intended to give all hearers space in which to try and comprehend what Jesus took on himself for our sakes.

Tonight's piece is the first verse of a Lutheran hymn written in 1530 by Sebald Heyden, which tells the whole story of the passion in 23 stanzas; while it was written for another tune, by the mid 1580s the tune we are about to hear was the usual one.

The words are very simple:

O Mensch, beweine dein Sünde groß

Darum Christus sein Vaters Schoß

äußert und kam auf Erden

Shed tears, O man, for your great sin:

for this Christ left his Father's bosom

and came to earth.

Von einer Jungfrau rein und zart

Für uns er hie geboren ward

Er wollt' der Mittler werden

From a pure and tender Virgin

he was born for us here

for he wanted to become our Mediator

Den Toten er das Leben gab

Und legt dabei all Krankheit ab

Bis sich die Zeit herdrange

He gave life to the dead

and with this put away all sickness

until the time came to fruition

Daß er für uns geopfert würd

Trüg unser Sünden schwere Bürd

Wohl an dem Kreuze lange

When he should be sacrificed for us

carry the heavy burden of our sins

long-suffering on the cross.

The setting of the words and hymn tune are the closing movement of the first part of Johann Sebastian Bach's Saint Matthew Passion. In the tradition of the great Lutheran Passion settings, the narration and dialogue of the Passion account is sung by soloists and chorus, with devotional material and congregational hymns interspersed so that the usually very large congregation could not only take part but also be reminded how relevant the Passion events are to them.

Bach originally wrote this music as a Chorale Fantasia for his second version of the Saint John Passion, but he then reworked it to conclude the first section of the Saint Matthew Passion, following the sentencing of Jesus to death by crucifixion. For Bach, and for us who listen, it is a poignant reminder of how selfless Christ is, who now has been condemned to a cruel death.

The music is sung by the RIAS Chamber Choir, with the Berlin State Choir, the Berlin Cathedral Choir, and the Berlin Academy for Ancient Music, conducted by René Jacobs. When I disappear in a moment I will first read the words slowly again, and then play the music. You may wish to choose some part of the church to focus on while this is happening, or look at the Lent array with its symbols of the Passion, or simply close your eyes and contemplate a mental image or nothing at all while considering the intensity of the music and the intensity of what Jesus was prepared to go through for our sake. I will then conclude with a prayer drawn from one of the texts sung as part of Bach's Saint Matthew Passion.

Chorale read again slowly in German and English

Music played

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMeai0xllE8> (not the same version as actually played in church...)

When one day I must depart
then do not leave my side;
When death shuts down this aching heart
then, Lord, with me abide.

When I am filled with fear and dread
and face the end of life,
then take me by your blood once shed
your agony and pain
to live with you again. Amen

PC, 25th March 2024