

III. Meinrad Walter, J. S. Bach: Johannes Passion

This interesting and well written study by Meinrad Walter has the subtitle “a theological introduction.” It is intended for a general audience and focuses on the theology of Bach’s work, including both the theology of the text and the theology of the music. However, the subtitle is deceiving in a positive sense: while the book is geared towards a general audience, it is nowhere simplistic and both Walter’s analytical remarks and the ample number of music examples require at least a basic knowledge of music. Walter’s analytical remarks are always very perceptive and the book is of value for musicians, musicologists, and theologians alike.

Walter opens his book with a short overview of Lutheran passion theology and its musical manifestation in Germany in the sixteenth through early eighteenth centuries. He also gives a short overview of the genesis of the *St. John Passion* and describes the four versions that can be reconstructed. It is very laudable that Walter treats extensively the second version from 1725, which differs significantly from the normally performed version in that it incorporates numerous influences from the chorale cantata cycle Bach had composed in the months preceding its completion.

The main body of the text is a movement-by-movement discussion of the *Passion*, interrupted between part I and part II by an “intermezzo” on the function of Bach’s passions in the liturgy (information that was missing from the *Laaber Bach Handbuch*) and an “excursus” on the problem of anti-Judaism in the passion. Walter’s interpretation attempts to integrate the musical and theological aspects of the movements. Although he is interested in the theological meaning of the music (which sometimes diminishes its autonomy and neglects the fact that music has to follow its own rules), he does not hunt for hidden theological messages or interpret every detail as charged with theological meaning.

Walter’s theological interpretations have the modern reader in mind. Even though he is knowledgeable about eighteenth-century Lutheran theology, the primary goal of the book is not to locate Bach’s passions in the religious and theological landscape of the

eighteenth century. Readers with an interest in historical theology will miss references to passion sermons from Bach's time and Walter's interpretations could have benefitted from occasional inclusions of these aspects. It would have shown on the one hand the historical and intellectual distance between the eighteenth and twenty-first century listeners but could also have helped to bridge the gap between Bach's piety and the concertgoer living in the year 2012. Readers who are interested in Bach's own theological environment will have to wait for an upcoming book by Eric Chafe, which will explore the *St. John Passion* in the context of "Johannine theology" and eighteenth century passion theology.²²

Readers might be tempted to challenge some of Walter's interpretations of the Passion (as would the reviewer) but overall his observations are carefully voiced and very perceptive. How he deals with the different versions of some of the movements and Bach's practice of revisions is especially valuable. Instead of viewing revisions only from a philological perspective, he asks for the reasons behind the revisions and thus includes Bach's compositional process in his analysis. Walter is careful to address the idea that changes were not necessarily made for theological reasons, but that some of them nevertheless have theological consequences.

While Walter's book does not have a separate chapter on the reception history, the discussion of some movements leads to small excursions on their reception. A good example is the examination of the movement "Es ist vollbracht," in which Walter traces some tracks of its reception from Robert Schumann's instrumentations, which adds trumpets to the middle section, to Hans Blumenberg's philosophical view of this movement (pp. 182–86).

Only occasionally does the text lack precision or contain simple mistakes. For instance, Walter calls Altnickol's copy of the *St. Matthew Passion* the "Erstfassung" (first version), while it should more

²²J. S. Bach's *Johannine Theology: The St. John Passion and the Cantatas for Spring 1725* (New York: Oxford University Press [in preparation]); the book had not been published when this article was written, but the publisher has announced it for sometime in 2012. I am grateful to Eric Chafe for letting me read an earlier version of the manuscript.

appropriately be called the “Frühfassung” (early version) as it reflects a version before the 1736 revision but not necessarily the version performed in 1727. He also misidentifies the date for the transfer of the movement “O Mensch beweine” from the *St. John Passion* (for which it was composed in 1725) to the *St. Matthew Passion*. Walter’s date “1727” is inaccurate (otherwise the movement would have had to appear in the Altnickol copy); the piece was moved in 1736. But the merits of the book definitely outweigh the minor mistakes.

The most problematic point is his identification of the librettist for the *St. John Passion*. According to Walter, the libretto for the first version from 1724 was written (and in part compiled from other texts) by Andreas Stübel (1653–1725), a Leipzig con-rector at the Thomas School, who has occasionally been discussed as a possible author for the chorale cantata cycle from 1724/25. Walter’s book reads as if it were a fact that Stübel was the author. However, there is no indication that this is the case. The only reason that Stübel had occasionally been suggested as a possible author for the chorale cantata texts was the fact that he died at about the time that Bach abandoned his cycle, so that the death of the librettist could explain Bach’s abandonment of the chorale cantatas. Stübel’s authorship, however, is highly problematic as he had been let go from his position at the School in 1697 after he was accused of holding heretical views. There is no indication that Stübel wrote a single libretto for Bach and considering the circumstances of his dismissal, it is rather unlikely that he wrote cantata texts for the liturgy in Leipzig. Walter, on the other hand, introduces him not only as the author of the chorale cantatas but even as Bach’s “main librettist” in Leipzig before his collaboration with Picander, and in the latter half of his book treats Stübel’s authorship of the text for the passion as if it were a fact. One hopes that Walter’s faulty assumption does not find its way into program books or even other studies of the *St. John Passion*. Some details have the tendency to survive even against better knowledge.

The main value of Walter’s book lies in its perceptive interpretations of the individual movements of the passion. Even though his approach is not a primarily musicological one, his observations are valuable even for musicologists, and document a deep understanding of Bach’s musical style and the theological

implications of his compositional decisions. The way Walter addresses the versions and the compositional process in his interpretations is especially valuable.

IV. John Butt, *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity*

While the *Laaber Bach Handbuch* and Meinrad Walter's monograph follow a more traditional approach in their studies of Bach's passions, the third book represents a markedly different method. John Butt's *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity* is an attempt to confront Bach's music with philosophical questions of modernity. The book is strongly influenced by Karol Berger's magisterial essay *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow*, which presents an inspiring interpretation of the concepts of time in the arias and the opening chorus of the *St. Matthew Passion*. Berger attributes to Bach a circular concept of time, which he interprets as a reflection of Bach's general perception of time as divinely predetermined, moving circularly until God determines the end of time; Mozart's perception of time on the other hand would be more directional, which is interpreted by Berger as a reflection of a general paradigm shift in time perception during the course of the eighteenth century. Butt takes Berger's observations as a point of departure but paints a more detailed picture by pointing out that in fact different types of time perception exist in Bach's passions and that these concepts of time have various functions within the dramatic context of the passion. Both Berger and Butt are able to show how aria structures (da capo versus through-composed or modified da capo) can be read and analyzed with the background of the general philosophical discourse on time in mind. While this view is intriguing and useful in some cases, I am wondering whether a rather new musical form like the da capo form can indeed serve as an indication for a more traditional perception of time while a through-composed form, which historically predates the da capo-form, with its linearity would then reflect a linear understanding of time.

Butt's book is not a movement-by-movement study of the two passions but treats different questions regarding Bach's music in a systematic way. The author undertakes an interpretation of Bach's passions from a new angle; as he points out, the study is an "attempt to examine these complimentary works in the light of the broader
