

A Confluence of Structure, Technique, and Influence in the 1829 Berliner Singakademie's St. Matthew Passion



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WRITER'S COMMENT: I began this project wanting to explore philosophical claims that music provides an additional, perhaps even more important, function for society beyond entertainment and pleasure. Integrating these claims into an articulate thesis was more of a struggle than I anticipated. Philosophy studies the fundamental nature of things, a slippery subject especially with regard to music. Even the great philosophers strained to evaluate music's humanistic value and purpose, and often came to disparate opinions on the topic. As I wrestled with these ideas, Professor Whithaus and my classmates provided thoughtful criticism, compelling me to solidify my own nebulous ideas and to integrate them with my research. I must admit that I felt nearly defeated until identifying a historical thread connecting Greek tragedy, Bach's St. Matthew Passion, and nineteenth-century philosophy. They intersect in an 1829 musical performance that highlights music's ability to propel the mind into contemplative thought and to impart knowledge of deeply abstracted concepts. This is where music transcends entertainment—and how music history can illuminate our own human condition.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: James Cota wrote his examination of the Berliner Singakademie's 1829 performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion in my UWP 101 Advanced Composition course. The class as a whole was a talented group of writers, and James worked with a group of five other writers who decided to investigate different aspects of music and emotion. Two of the group members examined types of music therapy, two considered aspects of heavy metal music—one

of those pieces included a subtle take on perceptions of heavy metal music fans and how they can be socially ostracized—and the last student considered how the chords, keys, rhythms, and themes within lyrics in American popular music changed over the last fifty years. While each group member produced a memorable essay, I had been especially impressed with how James was developing and focusing his piece throughout the quarter. James was interested in major issues of performance as well as 19th-century German philosophy, literature, and culture. Many students would have been overwhelmed by the range of topics that James wanted to consider, but he kept writing and researching until he found a focal point that allowed him to explore the connections across these areas. By focusing on an amateur choral group and their performance, he grounded his topic and produced what I find to be an engaging, detailed, and—ultimately—moving piece that reflects on music, culture, and the complexity of human emotions.

— *Carl Whithaus, University Writing Program*

Music is an unconscious exercise in metaphysics in which the mind does not know it is philosophizing.¹ – Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz

Talking about ideas that do not involve data, values that do not envision profit, and education that does not strive to a profession runs counter to much of the public discourse in 2017 America. How much more difficult is discussing philosophy and the transcendent aspects of art—and how their effects were internalized by participants in a performance that took place almost two centuries past. The challenge is in conveying the sublime character of contemplative thought, the importance of philosophical explorations into the nature of human reality in nineteenth-century Germany, and the emotional intensity that can be transmitted through a choir performance. The tradition of Western art

¹ Translated from “Musica est exercitium metaphysices occultum nescientis se philosophari animi.” in Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, pg. 264.

and philosophy are rooted in classicism, as are the ideas and methods that surround the revival performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829 by the Berliner Singakademie. Perhaps it is best to start at the beginning, with the Greeks and their great annual festival of Dionysus.

In ancient Greece, the annual Dionysian drama festival was meant for all citizens; even prisoners were released to attend the full week of events (Jackson). This attests to the cultural magnitude of the event. In fact, it was more than entertainment, it was a humanistic education. The Greeks used mythology and by extension, the dramatic genre of Greek tragedy to teach abstract concepts by symbolizing human experience. As some educators describe it, mythology is a dialogue between ritual and philosophy (Allender 52). Like the epic poetry of Homer or the Taoist texts of Lao Tzu, the message of the work lies somewhere below the surface. We learn from processing its meaning, not from knowing the words. Greek tragedy works in this way, but with an additional aspect: music. Nineteenth-century philosophers argued that music can express ideas and meanings that are *beyond words*. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his philosophical treatise on Greek tragedy, describes music as an art intended to reveal an essential understanding of human reality through abstract knowledge (39). In other words: lessons that cannot be taught by rote, answers that cannot be recited. This internalized knowledge affects our individual character, our sense of compassion, our cultural values. It makes us more . . . human.

In Europe's early modern period, the performance of Greek tragedy was rare, although it became more common as time progressed into the twentieth century (Goldhill). The Berliner Singakademie was an amateur choir with little interest in public performance, and its members did not set out to perform Greek drama. Instead, they intended to revive one of Johann Sebastian Bach's great works after the manuscript was gifted to one of the Singakademie's members, Felix Mendelssohn. In 1829, the Berliner Singakademie offered the public an exceptional performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. However, the Singakademie cannot take full credit, for the impact of the event was as much a product of the public's reception as it was of the performers' delivery. The philosophical and cultural issues spawned by the Enlightenment and the Napoleonic wars influenced the way in which the performance was experienced by the audience. Its impact was further augmented by another element: the chorus acting in Greek fashion as the "ideal spectator." The chorus lyrically reflected the

emotions of the audience, allowing their thoughts to transcend the literal events of the drama, in order to contemplate its underlying meaning (Schlegel 80). Three elements collide in the Singakademie's *St. Matthew Passion*: the structure of Greek tragedy related to plot and rhetoric in the biblical text, the Berlin public's receptivity from exposure to philosophical idealism by way of literary culture, and Bach's interlocking of scripture and music. The confluence of these elements brought an unexpected reaction in the audience that is preserved in the written historical record, showing their experience of the performance beyond the aesthetics of entertainment. Through contemplation some observers seemed to reach an empathic knowledge which, after all, was the intent of both Matthew and Bach.

I. The Structure of Greek Drama in Matthew's Gospel and the *St. Matthew Passion*

The attendees of the Singakademie's *St. Matthew Passion* received a book, written by the society's director Carl Zelter, with performance notes and an introduction to its historical background, including its ties to Greek tragedy. Zelter suggested a link between the ancient chorus of Greek tragedy and the modern church cantata as a means to incorporate the voice of the community into the drama, allowing the audience to "participate in, empathize with, and comment on the tragic events unfolding in front of them" (Applegate 226). However, Zelter was unaware of additional connections between Matthew's first-century text and Greek drama. As a genre, tragedy had passed from Greek to Roman drama and continued to be staged in the Holy Land at the dawn of Christianity. McCuiston, Warner, and Viljoen argue that a Hellenistic influence had integrated into the cultural landscape of Roman-occupied Judea. When Herod the Great brought the theatre to Jerusalem, tragedy was part of the repertoire (McCuiston 3). A comparison of Greek tragedy's structural elements with the episodes from Matthew's gospel shows that each element of tragedy is satisfied within the five structural narratives of Matthew. For example, the element of *Prologue* is present in the narrative of Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1:1-17, establishing the "metaphysical background" to the primary topic. Other elements present in the gospel include *Episode*, *Stasimon*, and *Exodos*. The element of *Parodos* is typically the entry song of the chorus to set the stage for the

episodes. In Matthew's gospel, text narratives are substituted (McCuiation 4), but Bach's addition of chorales restores the musical element of tragedy. It seems that the Matthew text is well suited for the musical setting of the *Passion*. Indeed, over the centuries performances of Matthew's text have been seen numerous iterations, including *passion plays* and musical settings that preceded Bach's.

II. Bach's Musical Technique and the Ideal Spectator

Although unknown to Berlin's nineteenth-century public, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* was written in the tradition of passion plays that began in the middle ages and reenacted the stations of the cross during Holy Week (Applegate 225). Bach's *Passion* relates the biblical narrative of the betrayal, suffering, and resurrection of Jesus, and dramatizes Christianity's abstract themes surrounding sacrifice and redemption. It is a combination of direct quotation from the complete chapters 26-27 of Matthew's gospel (as translated by Martin Luther during the Reformation three centuries earlier), traditional hymns as chorales, and poetry by Christian Friedrich Henrici. When performed under Bach's direction at Leipzig's St. Thomas Church in the 1720's and 30's, it ran approximately three hours, not including the sermons before, between acts, and after the *Passion*. Imagine spending nearly five hours in church service for the liturgical calendar's most somber occasion.

Bach's musical score includes some interesting devices that heighten the emotional connection with the audience and implies the influence of Greek tragedy. For the ensemble, the score indicates a double chorus, each with its own small group of vocalists and instrumentalists. The *Passion* has seventy-eight movements, most of them to be performed by a single chorus. The remaining movements indicate a double chorus (Bach), creating a higher intensity, including the fourteen chorales which are Bach's musical arrangements of traditional hymns. In the chorales, the *Passion* operates in the mode of Greek tragedy, connecting to the audience's emotions. Here Bach employs an interesting device: wherever he inserts a chorale, he links it with an idea or even a literal word in the preceding scriptural text. For example, when Jesus announces to his disciples that one of them will betray him, they each respond, "Lord, is it I?" (Matthew 26:22). The double chorus sings a chorale in response: "It is I, I must atone . . ." Later, when Jesus has been arrested and a crowd

abuses and strikes him, they mockingly say, “Prophesy to us, Christ, who is he that smote thee?” (Matthew 26:68). Now the double chorus sings: “Who has beaten you, my Savior . . .” Bach interlocks familiar church hymns within the drama of the *Passion*, and thereby connects empathetically with his audience. Bach’s ingenious device magnifies the traditional tragedy chorus’s empathic function. In his nineteenth-century lectures on Greek drama, August Wilhelm Schlegel describes the chorus as the “ideal spectator” who assuages our discomfort with the distressing storyline, “while it conveys to the actual spectator a lyrical and musical expression of his own emotions and elevates him to the region of contemplation.” Although Schlegel argues that modern staging and audiences could not produce a true representation of Greek tragedy (80), he could not have anticipated the uncalculated parallels that would occur in the Singakademie’s performance twenty years following his lectures.

III. Influences on the Berlin Public and Choral Societies

At the height of the Romantic era, the middle-class public of 1829 Berlin was interested in building a national community. The primary vehicle for the project was literary culture. Scholars such as Celia Applegate and Gloria Flaherty have shown how literary and music journals nurtured the “distinctive German version of the classical ideal” (qtd. in Applegate 49) and contributed to an “aesthetic debate [that] made musical life part of nationalizing culture.” The nineteenth-century journals discussed broad ranging issues of academia and culture, including music and literary criticism (Applegate 49). One subject of discourse was the decline of church music, which lacked sufficient numbers of German singers. This was due to the paucity of support by the recently unified (Calvinist-Lutheran) protestant church, along with the erosive management of liturgical repertoire that began even before King Friedrich Wilhelm III’s 1817 unification mandate (Applegate 188, 224). Concurrently, the court system that had supported secular musicians for centuries was also in decline, exacerbated by the financial strain of the king’s successive military campaigns (Applegate 133) With the three hundredth anniversary of the Reformation (and Martin Luther’s beloved translation of the Bible) recently celebrated in 1817, most Germans retained strong Christian allegiance; however, church

attendance was declining (Applegate 193). The Berlin public, especially women, sought membership in secular choral societies to fill the social void and to seek self-improvement through music. For decades, the Singakademie's membership grew so rapidly that a lottery was instituted to filter applications; at one point its waiting list grew so long that a new society recruited a full membership roster from the waiting list alone (Rutledge 96). For a sense of scale, the Singakademie peaked at 642 members in 1842 (Applegate 168). By then it was a model for hundreds of other choral societies throughout Germany and overseas in the United States (Applegate 133).

As church and court declined, Enlightenment thought was expanding its influence in German universities and cities through the work of philosophers in books, journals, and lectures. When Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* was published in 1790, his dismissive attitude towards music drew strong criticism even from his pupils and supporters. While the next generation of German philosophers revered Kant, they were compelled to disentangle his judgment on music from the rest of his philosophically innovative work exploring the human experience of beauty and the sublime. His treatment of music "touched the nerve of the entire spiritual and intellectual culture of his time" by finding no distinction between art and entertainment (Applegate 55, 57). The field of post-Kantian philosophy quickly expanded with the works of Weimar classicists including Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Johann Gottfried Herder. Parted from rationalism, their work articulated humanistic explanations of music and art. In turn, they influenced a third generation of German philosophers including Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling and Arthur Schopenhauer. As a result, writers began to distinguish pleasant musical entertainment from artistic music of "expressive genius" that conveys ideas for which words are insufficient.

IV. Schopenhauer on the Arts and Tragedy

Schopenhauer was arguably the first German philosopher to shift from a metaphysical model of reality to an ethical one. In doing so, he replaced the metaphysically transcendent substrate of reality—a conscious and all-knowing God—with an unconscious materialistic substrate based on matter and consciousness: the *will* (Ebert). His clear and methodically organized views were highly influential for later philosophers like

Nietzsche, but largely ignored in his own time, except for his insights on art and music which caught the attention of writers, poets, artists and musicians. If we accept Schopenhauer's thoughts on art, we would say its purpose is to present ideas; through the uniquely expressive properties of each art discipline, an idea is objectified in a different manner. It logically follows that an effective integration of artistic disciplines presents ideas in a multidimensional manner. Schopenhauer explains this by using an allegory of water. In a pond we see one idea of water, in a river or a waterfall another. By experiencing different manifestations of water objects, our idea of water expands towards a greater understanding of water. He then extends the allegory of water to encompass the human perception of reality and explains that each of art's disciplines expresses a unique perspective on that reality. Here, Schopenhauer was influenced by Aristotle's reflections on tragedy in *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, while the "pleasure given by music is natural," its role in tragedy is representational (Sifakis 29), or mimetic. For Schopenhauer, the poetic genre of tragedy is paramount in its ability to show us the complex dialectic of *will* (action by nature or any other force, and which previous philosophers associated with God) and *idea* (all else, which are objects of perception or knowledge). Ultimately, Schopenhauer suggests that through the genre of tragedy we may perceive the "real nature of the world," the absolute being which is concealed by *Maya*, or illusion. Therefore, the purpose of tragedy is to reveal aspects of reality that cannot be transferred through usual means of communication or education (Schopenhauer 252-3). From the work of writers and philosophers such as Schopenhauer, musicians came to recognize the importance—the *sublimity*—of artistic music and its value to Germany's growing national culture. As a result, musicians were driven to seek recognition and to pursue "education beyond craftsmanship" (Applegate 60). From this legacy grew the Singakademie.

V. The Singakademie's *St. Matthew Passion*

The *St. Matthew Passion* was an unusual project for the Berliner Singakademie, which gave few performances; their stated goal was the "edification of its members" and the preservation of neglected music "until better times arrived." Rehearsals were open, and literary and popular figures attended, including Ludwig van Beethoven (Applegate 192-3). The Berlin revival performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* was

quite unlike the original version directed by Bach for the Good Friday liturgies in the early 1700's. The Singakademie's revival, spearheaded by Felix Mendelssohn, used a large choir of almost 150 singers instead of the small double chorus employed by Bach in Leipzig. Instrumentation was substituted where working examples of the specified instruments were no longer in existence, for example the viola da gamba. The three-and-a-half hour production was cut down to two hours to make it more manageable for the singers and palatable for a concert-going audience (Applegate 38, 41), and notably, this was a concert performance, not a liturgical service. Even so, letters and articles written by audience members and participants in the Singakademie's performance attest to its spiritual impact. The public's anticipation of the Singakademie's production of the *St. Matthew Passion* was driven by the growing embrace of national culture. Fueled by the "German ideal of self-cultivation," which informed the public's understanding of new experiences, the performance was recognized for its historic element, and therefore its humanistic value for education (Applegate 221).

Although these were not typical ideas surrounding musical performance, the revival of a historical work and its composition by such a revered, if otherwise unfashionable composer, led commentators into difficult questions about the nature of the *Passion* and how it fit into the "scheme of human creations" (Applegate 221). Joseph Maria von Radowitz, a member of the court circuit and later a diplomat, attended all three performances and documented some of his lingering reflections on his experience: "In it one finds, the whole world; the creation is in it, as is the central point of world history, as are we ourselves in our barren present" (qtd. in Applegate 223). Although we will find later that Radowitz disapproved of the performance's aesthetic and was skeptical of its entertainment value, he was clearly impressed by what it revealed to him. Another attendee, Adolf Bernard Marx, editor of the *Berliner Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* music journal, wrote, "It is impossible for me to speak of the work itself and its effect, already the first chorus leads all listeners to forget the music they have just heard before, to forget all means of musical judgment they had once used" (qtd. in Applegate 220-221). However, Marx regains his composure to describe the power lent to the performance through the direct use of Matthew's scriptural text: "[Its] faithfulness to the word are riches the equal of which can be found in no other musical work" (qtd. in Applegate 229). The

Passion performance struck the Singakademie members as well. Fanny Mendelssohn describes in a letter the “sheer surprise” in Singakademie members’ reactions following the performance, recalling that they “marveled, gaped, admired” and expressed “astonishment that they of all people should have had so little knowledge that such a work even existed” (qtd. in Applegate 220). These accounts and others reflect the difficulty in describing the *St. Matthew Passion* revival. Our vocabulary simply does not contain the necessary words to transmit the meanings within the music and tragedy encompassed in the *Passion*.

Even so, not all of the attendees were ecstatic about the *Passion*’s revival. The public was unaware of the *Passion* play’s centuries of tradition which had been repressed decades earlier through church reform. As a result, some critics found Bach’s combination of scriptural text with musical styles borrowed from opera, liturgy and oratorio to be inappropriate. (Applegate 225). Even Radowitz, who was fascinated by his extra-temporal experience of the performance, ultimately finds the *Passion*’s “swirling winds of emotions” too intense and “both theologically and musically objectionable” (qtd. in Applegate 228). For these detractors, the expressive form and experience at the heart of Greek tragedy seemed unprecedented, emotionally manipulative, and lacking an agreeable aesthetic.

Conclusion

As the Singakademie’s performance shows us, a confluence of Greek tragedy’s structure, Bach’s compositional technique, and idealist influences occurred in 1829 Berlin. The public proved responsive, and the *Passion*’s tragic mimesis elevated them, as Schlegel would say, to the region of contemplation. Are we and the Berliners of the nineteenth century so much different than the Greeks at the dawn of their developments in scientific method and rationality? Are we so unlike the Romantics, who wrestled with the new politics and scientific developments at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution? We still seek pleasure, reassurance, and catharsis in musical performance, whether in an amphitheater, a church, a concert hall, or a night club. We use music to elevate our consciousness and to develop knowledge and understanding of our human nature. Tragedy, like the *St. Matthew Passion*, is a collection of these pursuits—intelligent design, so to speak—in a performance medium passed down

through millennia to educate us in the realities of our own condition. Bach invigorated Matthew's gospel with the choral element of tragedy, creating the potential for a strongly empathetic connection with its audience. The Berlin public was primed to make that connection with their exposure to idealist concepts, propagated through literature and lectures influenced by the second and third generations of German philosophers after Kant. In America's continuing drive towards utility and industry, the relevance of introspection and contemplation is easily overshadowed, even discouraged. But by looking into the past and connecting with its people and ideas, we learn to see our present and ourselves more intimately. We find that art music allows our consciousness to extend beyond the bounds of our lexicon, where we increase our ability to explore the meaning and nature of being human.

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