

About the Music

ORATORIOS WITH AND WITHOUT NARRATION

Many of the gospel readings assigned to Sundays and feasts in the eighteenth-century Lutheran liturgy tell New Testament stories. In Bach's cantatas for these occasions, these episodes are often reduced simply to words of Jesus sung by a bass, the traditional *vox Christi*; the underlying narrative is often not explicitly presented. Newly-written poetry forms much of the text of these works and typically focuses on emotional responses rather than the events themselves, pointing to the underlying narrative indirectly. But there were several observances during the church year that centered around a more extended narrative and for which it was traditional to compose musical settings that related these stories in the original gospel words.

Those occasions focused on significant events in the life of Jesus, starting with Christmas. The narrative for that occasion was almost always drawn from Luke's gospel, and this, of course, was the context of Bach's Christmas Oratorio, heard in six parts over the twelve days of the Christmas observance. The other occasions on which narrative was favored spanned Good Friday through Easter, Ascension Day, and Pentecost, and the assigned texts narrate Jesus's crucifixion, resurrection, ascension to heaven; and the visit of the Holy Spirit. This passion narrative was the motivation for Bach's passion settings according to John's and Matthew's gospels.

What the *Christmas Oratorio* and Bach's two passions have in common is narrative—they directly relate events in a scriptural voice; in all three, a tenor sings words of a gospel in a declamatory musical style with simple punctuating accompaniment by keyboard and bass-range string instruments. Together with this narration goes the musical delivery of direct speech. The words of individuals (Herod, Jesus, Pilate) are presented by singers in various vocal ranges; the utterances of groups (shepherds, disciples, bystanders) are sung in ensemble vocal numbers (choruses). This results in a complete musical reading of the gospel narrative, vivified by the assignment of narration and direct speech to distinct singers and by the representation of groups by choral settings.

Unlike the Christmas observance, which tended to stick to one gospel (Luke's), the Lutheran telling of the passion and resurrection stories often drew on a so-called gospel harmony—harmony not in the musical sense but rather the reconciling of the four gospel accounts of the various events. The most famous of these was by Luther's contemporary Johannes Bugenhagen, whose *Historia of the Suffering and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ* was widely reprinted both in freestanding volumes and as a supplement to hymnals and prayer books. The narrative extended beyond the passion to Easter, to the forty days between Easter and Ascension Day, and to the period leading to Pentecost on the fiftieth day after Easter. Of these, the harmonized passion was by far the longest, running to more than 40 pages in its attempt to combine and reconcile the details offered by the four evangelists.

All this is the background to the two works on today's program—the other two pieces Bach called "oratorios." The *Ascension Oratorio* BWV 11 narrates Jesus' appearance to his disciples and his ascent to heaven in their presence. This work, the length of a weekly cantata, includes four passages of gospel narrative framed by an opening choral aria and a closing hymn stanza, and alternated with movements of commentary. These consist of newly-written poetry set as recitatives and as arias, and a setting of another hymn stanza. The narrative was not from a single gospel but adapted from the harmonized narrative that traces back to Bugenhagen, drawing on Mark's gospel, Luke's gospel, and the book of Acts to provide detail.

The text of Bach's *Easter Oratorio* BWV 249 is yet another step removed from the single gospel text typical of an oratorio. In fact there is no literal scripture at all in this libretto; its words are all newly-written poetry. The connection to oratorio, which Bach evidently saw clearly enough to use the word (at least in the last of his several revisions of the piece), lies in the participation of four named characters: Peter, John, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, all of whom appear in the Easter story. (These characters were named in an earlier version of the piece, but Bach did not label their lines explicitly in the latest version, heard here.) Rather than present that narrative literally, the work alludes to several episodes in it and to significant words that appear in Luther's German rendering. It makes these references in an imagined poetic dialogue among the four characters. The oratorio element here is represented by poetic text, not gospel words; by invented dialogue rather than quoted words; and in material drawn from multiple gospels—as a harmonized telling.



Texts & Translations

The *Ascension Oratorio* sets its tone with festive trumpets and drums in its opening chorus of praise. Such a movement might typically quote a psalm verse, but the text here is a newly written poem, and Bach's musical setting reflects its poetic organization. It is metrically regular, with periodic and balanced phrases that group in 2, 4, 8, and 16 measures. It is a so-called aria tutti—a choral aria, and is organized just like a typical solo aria around an opening instrumental ritornello that reappears at the end and throughout the movement. The kinship to solo arias can be heard in the leading melody in the soprano vocal line and in the way all four voices move fundamentally together. The celebratory scoring of the oratorio's opening returns in its final movement, a hymn setting also organized around a ritornello and presenting the tune in long notes in the soprano.

There are four passages of scriptural narrative, predictably delivered by tenor and supported by basso continuo, and each is responded to by a new text. The second of these, after the description of Jesus' ascension to the right hand of God, is answered by a hymn stanza with a line that means both "Now everything is subject to you" and "Now everything lies beneath you." This chorale divides the first half (which narrates the ascension) from the second (whose text describes reactions to it), and was possibly the place for the day's sermon.

The first scriptural passage describes Jesus' departure; the response is a poetic recitative and aria that take this as an occasion for sorrow. The text invokes poetic topics of tears and sighs, and Bach's settings use conventional gestures of lament and sorrow. The recitative presents tortured harmonies, expressive leaps in the vocal line, and an evocation of teardrops. The aria, in a minor key, offers a bleak texture of unison violins, alto voice, and a sparse bass line with silences between notes. There are many conventional sighing figures—a leaning gesture of two notes grouped together—and a vocal line with awkward leaps. (This is a famous movement, later reused, with many changes, as the "Agnus Dei" of the *Mass in B Minor*.) It is significant that the gospel narrative is neutral in tone, simply reporting the departure; it falls to the recitative and aria to provide an emotional (affective) guide for the listener.

The second part of oratorio treats the reaction to Jesus' ascension, reporting the words of two men in white who assert Jesus' eventual return. This is direct speech, and Bach makes it musically distinct from the narration, presenting it in two voices with textual repetition. The poetic reply to this passage is a recitative that makes a still-sorrowful plea for Jesus' return, using the same scoring (two flutes) as the earlier mournful recitative.

The final narrative passage describes the disciples' return to Jerusalem and their anticipatory joy. This affective turn is reflected in the following aria, with its dance-like musical meter and major key; flutes are here transformed into emblems of joy. Their use, along with a soprano voice, oboe, and violins with violas is usual enough, but the piece is striking in its omission of basso continuo—neither keyboard nor bass range instruments is called for. Their usual function is performed by the violins and viola playing a supporting line in a much higher range than usual. This texture, called *bassetto* (little bass), here probably reflects the many images of height in the work. The aria's uniformly high lines (soprano, flutes, oboe, upper strings) are all closely concentrated in the same range, offering a strong contrast to the bleak and widely spaced first aria.

The *Easter Oratorio* also uses trumpets and drums, instruments that must have sounded particularly striking after Leipzig's ban on elaborate church music during Lent, the "closed period" typically interrupted only by the somber colors of the Good Friday passion performance. The oratorio's opening sinfonia is a movement of the kind known as a *ripieno concerto*, in which the role of soloist is taken by various combinations of instruments drawn from the full ensemble, here oboes with bassoon, and violins. The second movement is a typical concerto slow movement, with a rhapsodic woodwind solo. That movement's open-ended conclusion leads into the opening chorus; with its construction based on a ritornello, it is effectively the expected fast third movement of a concerto, with voices in the role of "soloist." Its rollicking musical style is an evocation of the laughing and mirth in the text, but also a reflection of the hurrying described in its first line.

This is significant because "hurry" is an important word in the gospel narrative of the Easter story; several characters are described as hastening to Jesus' tomb. The gospel words themselves are never quoted directly in the *Easter Oratorio*; this element of the narrative is implied instead by the words of characters reacting to events. This is normal for cantatas, whose texts often refer only

About the Music

indirectly to the day's gospel, but striking here because of the expectation that an oratorio will typically present the scriptural narrative. The oratorio is full of these references—to spices brought, in vain, to prepare Jesus' body; to the separation of the tomb's covering stone, implying its miraculous rolling away; to the appearance of an angel; to the shroud found unwound, signifying Jesus' resurrection rather than the suspected stealing of his body; and to the sorrow of the two Marys. The chain of references invokes the story without presenting it directly.

The unusual absence of narration in this oratorio points to the work's greater concern with an affective (emotional) progression from sorrow to joy. The first recitative is full of significant words—sorrow, grieving, heartache, tears, sighing—that set an emotional tone. The first aria, in the voice of Maria, mother of James, musically extends the sorrow. Its textual topic is a symbolic exchange of myrrh (used to prepare a body for burial) for a laurel wreath signifying victory, invoking the so-called *Christus victor* theological topic of Jesus as triumphal warrior. But more importantly it is marked "adagio," features an expressive solo line, and emphasizes the word "Verlangen" (longing).

The second aria (for Peter) is principally a sleep piece, conventionally evoking slumber by the use of recorders, muted strings playing low in their ranges, notes grouped in pairs, and an opening musical phrase performed over one pitch in the bass. But once again sorrow is the true subject, and the cloth from Jesus' head, left behind, is described as wiping away tears. Even the identity of the speaker points in this direction because the figure of Peter was closely associated with weeping in tellings of the passion story. The next recitative invokes sighing and highlights the despairing cry of "Ach," and the last aria, in the voice of Mary Magdalene, combines the language of love (love, heart, embrace) with a forcefulness emphasizing its imperatives: tell me; come. Its music evokes hurrying once again, as in the first vocal movement.

The following recitative finally expresses joy, explicitly describing the transformation of sorrow, the topic of oratorio. Its invocation of songs of joy is realized in the last movement for the full forces, which combines dance with trumpet-and-drums rejoicing. Bach presents the last two lines, with their shift to a lilting poetic meter, in one final change of musical meter and expression of joy, reinforcing the emotional journey that the *Easter Oratorio* presents in place of a traditional literal narrative.

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