

Bach – St John Passion BWV245

Bärenreiter edition

Bach sets his interpretation of the story to music of intense expressive depth, and enormous stylistic range. The recitative settings of the gospel, and the polyphonic choral settings of the crowd, lie within the mainstream of Lutheran liturgical music, although the richly complex harmonies and contrapuntal elaboration of Bach's music are exceptional. Similarly, in the chorales Bach's harmonic genius enriches an established tradition of sacred music. The arias are influenced more by modern secular forms and styles, including the Sarabande rhythm of the tenor aria ' Ach, mein Sinn ', and the Minuet of the closing chorus ' Ruht wohl '. Bach was under stern instruction to avoid sounding too operatic; it almost seems in places that he had conveniently forgotten this. The instrumentation is a mixture of the archaic and the avant-garde: new and fashionable instruments like the transverse flute and the oboe d'amore appear side by side with archaic (although secular) ones like the lute and the viola da gamba. Bach uses the solo arias as opportunities to vary the instrumental palette: the vocal soloists are accompanied variously by obbligati for oboes, flute, strings, lute and gamba, with the full orchestra accompanying the choral movements.

The St. John Passion can be heard as a dramatic story of universal human emotions, as a theological exposition, as a challenge to amend and improve our lives, as a masterpiece of musical craftsmanship and invention, or as any combination of the above. There is no record of the reaction of the first audience in 1724, but they must have had some sense of how extraordinary a composition it is: how the supreme technical accomplishment of Bach's music is allied to an expressive purpose of complete sincerity and enormous profundity, which is still gripping, nearly 300 years on. It is never an easy work to listen to; it demands concentrated engagement from the listener, and was always meant to challenge and disturb. Approached like this, and despite the sometimes stern aspect of its faith, Bach's passion setting comes across as a deeply compassionate and optimistic story, where the crucifixion is an act of redemptive love, and the resurrection is awaited with certainty.

Extract by Peter Foster

NOTES FOR THE CHORUS

In Chorales, generally all pauses are OUT unless marked here otherwise. Always lighten the last note of each phrase to aid movement.

Page No	Bar	Voice	Detail
Movt 1			
1		All	STAND AT ENTRY OF CONDUCTOR
			Crotchet = c.72
3	19	All	Dynamic is <i>f</i> . Slightly anticipate "rr" of "Herr" ahead of next beat
	20.4	All	Dynamic is <i>mp</i> with cresc through following phrase
	21	B etc	Slightly mark all quavers (Other parts just articulate)
4	23 on	All	Dynamic is <i>f</i> . Slightly anticipate "rr" of "Herr" ahead of next beat
	25	All	Dynamic is <i>mp</i> with cresc through following phrase.
		B etc	Slightly mark all quavers (Other parts just articulate)
5	27-28	All	More legato quavers, then revert at b29 (B marked, others articulate)
6	33 on	All	Start dynamic is <i>mf</i> then drop a little. Tenuto the crotchets, lighten the shorter notes. Slur rising notes in "Herrscher". Cresc through the phrase
7	37	SB	Lighten rising quavers, articulate gently the semiquavers
		AT	Dynamic is <i>f</i> . Slightly anticipate "rr" of "Herr" ahead of next beat
8	40	All	Dynamic is <i>f</i> . Slightly anticipate "rr" of "Herr" ahead of next beat
	41	All	Dynamic is <i>mp</i> with cresc through following phrase etc etc

9	46	SAT	Quaver out of "ist"
10	49	A	Very fast breath after "Herrscher" then mark the new phrase.
	50 on	All	Articulate and sustain semiquavers. Mark quavers with energy.
12	56	AT	Run through after "herrlich"
	58	All	Ignore pause on first time. Second time, turn to p.24 Remain standing
	58 on	All	Start with clean "Ts" sound. Phrasing as for bar 33
15	69.4	All	Start with clean "F" sound, strong articulation of semiquavers
17	78 on	All	Start with clean "Ts" sound. Phrasing as for bar 33
21	95	All	NB DC
Movt 2			
24	18	All	NB Upbeats are in time. NB "Nazareth" ends with hard "T" sound
26	31	All	NB Upbeats are in time. NB "Nazareth" ends with hard "T" sound
Movt 3			Dynamic is <i>mf</i> See general note about pauses...
Movt 5			Dynamic is <i>mp</i> See general note about pauses... Sit on downbeat of No.7
			Stand p.51 on beat 1 of bar 42
Movt 11			Dynamic is v.1 <i>f</i> , v.2 <i>p</i> . See general note about pauses... Sops/Altos remain standing for extra movement p.238
Movt 11a			
239	10	SA	Sing in unison. Quaver out at end of bar. Count for yourselves! Confident leads and clear words throughout this movement please!
Movt 12			
53	1		TB Stand. SA Remain standing.
	5	All	This bar in time leading into rapid page turn...
54	6	All	Spit the words! Hard, early consonants!
56	22	All	No slowing down! Sit on downbeat for No.13
Movt 14			
64	No.13 b.89	All	Stand on beat 1
	1	All	Dynamic is <i>f</i> . See general note about pauses...
			INTERVAL AFTER No.14
Movt 15		All	STAND AT ENTRY OF CONDUCTOR
			Dynamic is <i>f</i> . See general note about pauses...
67	9	All	Dynamic is <i>mp</i> . Crescendo through next four bars, then <i>f</i> Remain standing
Movt 16		All	NB Upbeats are in time. Dynamic is <i>f</i> . Breathe at commas. Lighten quavers and sustain longer notes. Words need to have huge clarity!
69			
72 etc	24 etc	All	"nicht" needs to be punctuated and crisp in every voice. Remain standing
76	42		NB Upbeats are in time. Dynamic is <i>f</i> . Breathe at commas. Lighten quavers and sustain longer notes. Words need to have huge clarity! Remain standing
Movt 17			
84			Dynamic is v.1 <i>f</i> , v.2 <i>p</i> . Remain standing
Movt 18			
87	19	All	NB in-tempo final bar and VS into next page
88	23	All	Lift at comma after "Barrabam"
89	26	All	Sit on beat 3
Movt 21			
101	1	All	Stand on downbeat (following DC of no.20!)
	5	All	Mark VS at end of page
102	5 on	All	Mark initial 2 crotchets of each lead, then sustain. Lift at commas in the text

105	16	All	Mark and lightly detach the final two crotchets
106	28	All	Final 2 beats in tempo and join into 21d
107	29 on	All	Sustain longer notes. Hugely clear words in semiquaver figures!
113	56	All	In tempo, leading into 21f
	57	B etc	Firm, clear and purposeful! Good words!!
120	89	All	Remain standing
Movt 22			
123	1		Dynamic is <i>f</i> . Remain standing
Movt 23			
124	2	B etc	Firm, clear and purposeful! Good words!!
132	44	All	This bar in tempo, leading into
133	45	All	Firm, clear and purposeful! Good words!! ANGRY! Sustain longer notes. Hugely clear words in semiquaver figures!
139	71	All	Remain standing...mark VS at end of page after bar in tempo
140	75	All	Firm, clear and purposeful! Good words!!
141	82	All	Sit on downbeat
Movt 24			
143	40	SEMI	Semichorus only stands on beat 1
150	175	SEMI	Semichorus sits on beat 1
Movt 25	17	All	Stand on beat 1
	18	All	Dynamic is <i>f</i> .
	19 on	All	Shorten "nicht" to a quaver, except when it is a quaver already, then run through
154	24	STB	Lift after "König"
	25	All	Lift after "sondern"
156	29		Mark and lightly detach the final two crotchets on "König" Remain standing
Movt 26			
157	1		Dynamic is <i>f</i> . Remain standing
Movt 27			
159	10	All	Launch phrase with "L" then lighten quavers. Mark syncopations and articulate semiquavers. Take great care with falling final notes! PRIVATE PRACTICE NEEDED FOR THIS MOVEMENT!
167	64	All	Remain standing
Movt 28			
170	1	All	Dynamic is <i>mp</i> .
171	3	All	Sit on beat 1
Movt 32			
178			REMAIN SEATED!! Translate dotted-quaver / semiquaver rhythms into crotchet and quaver of 12/8 Translate quaver / 2 semiquaver rhythms into crotchet and 2 semis of 12/8
	4	All	Run through after "Jesu"
179	10	All	Mark VS at end of page
199	23	All	Stand on beat 3
Movt 37			
200	1	All	Dynamic is <i>mf</i> . Remain standing
Movt 39			Generally, lift a quaver at commas in the text
205	12 on	All	Very sustained and sensuous
206	26	S	2 crotchets (G and F)
207	36	S	Add quaver Bb at start of bar, then shorten Ab to another quaver
	39	S	Add quaver C at start of bar, then shorten B to another quaver
207	40	B	Ensure, in the nicest possible way, that you can be heard!
208	47	S	Trill with a generous Eb appoggiatura at the start
209	61	S	Sing quaver Bb at start of bar, then shorten A to a crotchet

210	65	S	Sing quaver C at start of bar, then shorten B to a crotchet
	71	S	Trill with a generous Ab appoggiatura at the start
212	90	S	IGNORE appoggiatura G
213	95	S	Trill with a generous Bb appoggiatura at the start
	100	S	Add quaver Bb at start of bar, then shorten Ab to another quaver
	103	S	Add quaver C at start of bar, then shorten B to another quaver
214	111	S	Trill on “zur” with a generous Eb appoggiatura at the start
215	124	All	Don't forget the DC! Jump to p.216 after Fine! Remain standing
Movt 40			
216	1	All	Dynamic is <i>mf</i> . Much breath control is required for this final chorale, especially in the last phrase. I don't want to hear any undue gaps please!

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