

Genesis

The attempt to reconstruct the genesis of Bach's St John Passion on the basis of the extant and unfortunately incomplete manuscript sources resembles the work of an archaeologist faced with the task of piecing together an antique vase from innumerable small fragments of pottery. At the beginning there exists merely a vague idea of what the vessel that he wishes to reconstruct may have looked like. It is only as a result of a great deal of trial and error that the work finally reaches a state the beholder finds convincing. This, and only this, he will exclaim, is what it must have looked like.

In the case of the St John Passion the minute 'archaeological' work has been done by Mendel, *KB*. Thus we can circumvent a detailed account of the process of reconstruction and present the result as seen by modern scholarship. The evidence for this is stated in Chapter II, which deals with transmission. It also provides an opportunity to discuss the differing scholarly interpretations of the sources.

Of course, the incomplete nature of the transmitted sources means that there are gaps in our knowledge when we attempt to reconstruct the genesis of the work. Here again a musicologist is in the same position as an archaeologist who is forced either to leave out missing fragments of his vase or to supply them on a hypothetical basis. A conscientious scholar will always point out the doubtful character of such substitutions.

INTRODUCTION: DID BACH COMPOSE A PASSION BEFORE 1724?

As we shall see, the first documented performance of Bach's St John Passion took place on Good Friday, 1724. However, only some of the parts have survived from this performance, and no score. The question thus arises of whether this really was the first performance, or whether other performances preceded it.

There is in fact only negative proof for the assumption that the work was first performed in 1724, though I believe it to be convincing. For a start, Philipp Spitta's assertion (ii. 348, 813–14 [Eng. trans. ii. 519, 710–11]) that Bach had already written out the first set of parts for the St John Passion in Cöthen is merely the result of his confusing similar water-marks, a pardonable error in view of when he was writing.¹ In fact no Cöthen manuscript of the Passion has survived, and there is not the slightest indication that such a manuscript ever existed. Furthermore, a Passion was certainly performed in Leipzig at St Thomas's Church on Good Friday 1723 while the post of cantor was vacant.² Yet there is no evidence whatsoever that this was directed by Bach, as Bernhard Friedrich Richter deduced from the information supplied by Spitta. In fact, if Bach had directed this performance of a Passion, it may safely be assumed that, in some way or other, it would have been mentioned in the Council Minutes relating to his election to the post of cantor at St Thomas's on 22 April 1723 (four weeks after Good Friday!).³ Finally, even if, contrary to all the evidence, Bach performed a Passion at St Thomas's Church on Good Friday 1723, it can hardly have been the St John Passion, which would thus have been played for three years in succession in the Leipzig *Hauptkirchen* (principal churches). In any case, it is certainly odd that it was performed again in 1725 (Bach must have had reasons of which we are unaware). A third performance a year earlier would have been too much of a sign of creative poverty. Bach's biography provides no evidence for a similar occurrence, not even one that resembles it approximately.

This consideration prompts us to ask whether Bach—even if it was not in 1723—had actually written another Passion before 1724.⁴ In fact only two of his five Passions⁵ have survived (BWV 244–5). The loss of a third is documented (BWV 247), whereas nothing is known about the other two. Again, early on in the Weimar period Bach copied out (or had copied out) the parts of a St Mark Passion by Reinhard Keiser.⁶ So

¹ Weiß, 28 (used by Bach in 1721 and 1722) and 29 (used by Bach in 1724 and 1725). See Ch. II for further details.

² Bernhard Friedrich Richter, 'Zur Geschichte der Passionsaufführungen in Leipzig', *BJ* (1911), 50–9; *Dok.* ii, no. 180, pp. 140–2.

³ See *Dok.* ii, no. 129, pp. 93–5.

⁴ See Alfred Dürr, 'Zu den verschollenen Passionen Bachs', *BJ* (1949–50), 81–99, and Mendel, I, II.

⁵ According to the 'Obituary'. See *Dok.* iii, no. 666, pp. 80–93; at p. 86.

⁶ See Andreas Glöckner, 'Johann Sebastian Bachs Aufführungen zeitgenössischer Passionsmusiken', *BJ* (1977), 75–119; at 76–89. The copying of parts always suggests a performance (at least a prospective one), whereas a manuscript copy of a score may simply have been a collector's item.

why should he not have composed and performed a Passion of his own in Weimar? A reference by Hilgenfeldt to a passion of 1717 would sound fairly unconvincing⁷ if Version II of the St John Passion did not contain a number of movements that could well have come from an earlier passion by Bach. (On the subject of Version II, see Ch. 1. 2.)

Recent research has shown that Bach was in Gotha around the time of Good Friday, 1717.⁸ Bach's first (?) Passion may well have been written at this time, and some or all of the movements in Version II of the St John Passion referred to above may have formed part of this work. However, it is unlikely that Bach composed a Passion during his years at Cöthen (1717–22), and it is highly improbable that he composed one for Leipzig in 1723.

1. VERSION I (1724)

In order to make it easier to compare the various versions, the starting-point for the following remarks will be the one on which the normal printed editions and in particular the main section of *NBA* II/4 (together with the corresponding miniature score) are based. It provides the background for a description of the deviations peculiar to each of the different versions. Lack of space means that I cannot include a list of variants which aims to be as complete as possible, as in Mendel, *KB*.

As we shall see in Chapter II, the first version of the St John Passion can only be partially reconstructed on the basis of some of the parts (the ripieno parts of the chorus, violin I and II, and continuo), and to some extent, from movement 10, bar 42^b onwards, from the readings of the surviving original score A. However, a series of questions remains unanswered, in particular with regard to the participation of woodwinds. The reason for this is not only the loss of the relevant parts, but also the frequently imprecise instrumental indications in the score. As we shall see, the parts of the solo voices have also survived incomplete, particularly in the case of movement 33.

Of course, by and large Version I corresponds to the familiar final version, though there are a number of minor differences. The most important ones are as follows:

⁷ Carl Ludwig Hilgenfeldt, *Johann Sebastian Bach's Leben, Wirken und Werke* (Leipzig, 1850, repr. Hilversum, 1965), 114: 'Bach is said to have composed one of the other three [passions] in 1717'.

⁸ See Eva-Maria Ranft, 'Ein unbekannter Aufenthalt Johann Sebastian Bachs in Gotha?', *BJ* (1985), 165–6, and Andreas Glöckner, 'Neue Spuren zu Bachs "Weimarer" Passion', in *Bericht über die Wissenschaftliche Konferenz anlässlich des 69. Bach-Festes der Neuen Bachgesellschaft, Leipzig, 29. und 30. März 1994* (Hildesheim, 1995), 33–46.

- (a) The style is occasionally less elaborate. It is not as yet enlivened by embellishments or notes that fill intervals, etc. For movements 1 to 10, first readings, inasmuch as they can be ascertained, are given in appendix I of the *NBA*, pp. 167–205.
- (b) The extent to which transverse flutes participate in the work continues to be an open question. In the original score A the heading, which was written about 1739, still fails to mention transverse flutes, although Version II of 1725 already has *flauto traverso* parts. Did Bach originally conceive the Passion without transverse flutes? Or did a versatile musician, who normally played a different instrument, have to step in to play the transverse flute in certain movements? The problem remains unresolved, and the reader is referred to Appendix I for a more detailed discussion of this issues involved.
- (c) In Version I, movement 33 comprised only 3 bars (I refer to this version as movement 33¹). As the original score already has the lengthier reading of Versions II and IV at this point, and as the solo tenor part, like most of the other parts of Version I, is no longer extant, only the surviving continuo part affords evidence of this short version. It is discussed in greater detail in Appendix II. If my view of the matter is correct (it is based on Mendel, *KB*), then in Version I only the first of the two passages of text interpolated into St John's account of the Passion was taken from St Matthew (movement 12^c, Matt. 26: 75), whereas the second passage, movement 33¹, was based on Mark 15: 38.

2. VERSION II (1725)

This version has survived in a form that is virtually complete. The only missing items are the parts for transverse flutes, oboes, and viola in movement 1^{II}, 'O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß', which in Version III were replaced by the corresponding parts for 'Herr, unser Herrscher'. However, it is possible to reconstruct them with the help of the sources of the St Matthew Passion (1736).

As we have seen, the reason why Bach performed the St John Passion in two consecutive years remains something of a mystery, and none of the attempts to shed light on the matter have come up with a hard-and-fast answer. For a more detailed discussion of this problem see Appendix III.

It seems that, only a year later, Bach himself no longer wished to perform the same version of the Passion. This is demonstrated by the changes he now introduced:

Movement 1 was replaced by 1^{II}, 'O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß'.
 Movement 11⁺, 'Himmel reiße, Welt erbebe' was newly inserted after movement 11.

Movement 13 was replaced by 13^{II}, 'Zerschmettert mich, ihr Felsen und ihr Hügel'.

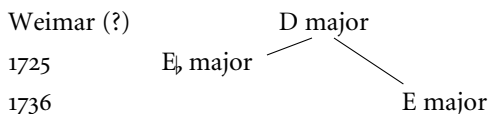
Movements 19–20 were replaced by 19^{II}, 'Ach windet euch nicht so, geplagte Seelen'.

Movement 33^I was replaced by the seven-bar movement 33 that we know today.

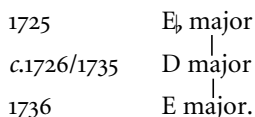
Movement 40 was replaced by 40^{II}, 'Christe, du Lamm Gottes'.

Of these movements, 33 was without doubt newly composed in order to replace the text of Mark 15: 38 with that of Matthew 27: 51–2, which corresponded more closely to the words of the following arioso (movement 34).

The provenance of the other movements can only be surmised (see the literature referred to in n. 4, above). 'O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß' (movement 1^{II}) was probably based on an original version in D major,⁹ and this may well have been written in Bach's Weimar period, in which case the choir pitch (*Chorton*) would have been D major, whereas the recorders and oboes would have played in chamber pitch (*Kammerton*), F major. However, the Weimar origins of the movement do not seem to have been conclusively established. Mendel's main argument in favour of such origins, the intervallic emendations in the woodwind staves of the autograph manuscript of the St Matthew Passion, does not in fact settle the matter (see Crit. Report, NBA, II/5, p. 80). In the case of the St Matthew Passion (1736) it is perfectly possible to trace the work back to an original in D major. However, although this also seems probable in the case of the St John Passion (1725), as Mendel has demonstrated with reference to certain voice-leading peculiarities, conclusive proof is lacking, so that in addition to the most obvious relationship:



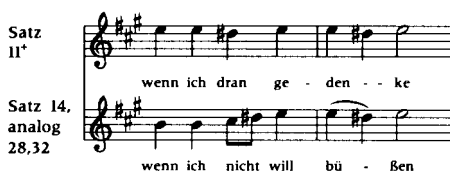
it is not entirely possible to rule out the following:



⁹ See Mendel, I, II, and the Crit. Report, NBA II/5, p. 80.

Furthermore, the dimensions of the chorale chorus are unusually large if we assume that it was written in Weimar, though not inconceivable for the time around 1716/17 (see above, Hilgenfeldt, n. 7, and Glöckner, n. 6).

‘Himmel reiße, Welt erbebe’ (movement 11⁺) was probably written before 1725, presumably in Bach’s Weimar period. This becomes especially apparent in the cantus firmus version of the sixth line of the chorale ‘Jesu Leiden, Pein und Tod’. It is improbable that in 1725 Bach would have departed so radically from the form of the melody selected a year earlier for movements 14, 28, and 32 if he had not been prompted to do so by an earlier version:



There is no indication that ‘Zerschmettert mich’ (movement 13^{II}) and ‘Ach windet euch nicht so’ (movement 19^{II}) were written before 1725. However, it is possible to come to conclusions similar to those reached in the case of movements 1^{II} (?), 11⁺, and 40^{II}.

At any rate, ‘Christe, du Lamm Gottes’ (movement 40^{II}) had been used before Good Friday 1725 as the final chorale of Cantata No. 23, ‘Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn’.¹⁰ There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that the movement had been written at an even earlier date.

It has frequently been surmised that the replacement of the introductory chorus (movement 1) with a chorale chorus (1^{II}), the insertion of an aria with chorale (11⁺), and the much more elaborate treatment of the final chorale (40^{II}) should be seen in the context of the 1724–5 cycle of chorale cantatas.¹¹ There is no doubt an element of truth in this. However, it should be remembered that the chorale cantata, at least in the context of the Leipzig tradition,¹² had a different function, namely to complement the chorale sermon. There was of course no place for such a function in the context of Good Friday evensong. Furthermore, the

¹⁰ Until the Crit. Report NBA 1/8 is published see Christoph Wolff, ‘Bachs Leipziger Kantoratsprobe und die Aufführungsgeschichte der Kantate “Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn”, BWV 23’, *BJ* (1978), 78–94.

¹¹ See e.g. Wolff (cited above, n. 2), 88 and Chafe (1982: 110).

¹² See Alfred Dürr, ‘Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Bachschen Choralkantaten-Jahrgangs’, in Martin Geck (ed.), *Bach-Interpretationen* (Göttingen, 1969), 7–11.

excision of these movements in the subsequent versions would remain inexplicable. After all, the chorale cantatas were later performed in their original states. Whether there is any truth to this theory must remain a matter for debate. However, Bach's alterations may simply have been due to a desire to make some changes to a Passion that had to be performed two years in succession.

Evidently Bach did not consider Version II of the St John Passion to be a step on the path leading to a final version, for most of the 'improvements' were removed when the work was next performed. One of the reasons for this may have been that he wished to perform the hypothetical earlier work (or works) from which he had borrowed some of the movements, and that he was unwilling to incorporate the latter permanently in the St John Passion. In order to understand this procedure correctly, we must attempt to develop a more profound understanding of the mentality of a composer of the age of Bach, who would have been wholly familiar with the concept of the 'pasticcio' (pastry), which involved assembling a multi-movement work from compositions of diverse origin and even by different composers. The favourite genre in this regard was opera. However, the music of a Passion was not infrequently put together in this manner, and the idea of intellectual property rarely became an issue. Thus when Bach occasionally had recourse to movements taken from his own compositions, this was certainly not unusual. In particular, it usually had nothing to do with the notion that the movement concerned was not suited to its original location and had at last found its true vocation. The suitability for a performance alone determined the selection of the pieces, not the concept of an ideal and immortal work of art.

3. VERSION III (C.1730)

This version, which is difficult to date precisely, is characterized by two features: the removal of the changes made in Version II and the excision of the passages from St Matthew's Gospel. Thus movements 1 and 19–20 returned to their original positions. Movement 11⁺ was omitted, and so, for reasons that are difficult to understand, was the final chorale (movements 40 and 40¹¹).

It is not quite clear why Bach discarded the inserts from St Matthew. The most plausible reason may have been an injunction from the church authorities (for details see App. III, p. 120). If Bach himself agreed to the

excision of these passages, it would be difficult to account for the fact that he reversed his decision in Version IV.

As a result of this alteration to the text of the Gospel it also became necessary to make changes in the movements that commented on the biblical text. Thus, if we disregard a few minor deviations, the structure of Version III was as follows:

Movements 1–12^b as in Version I.

Movement 12^c only to b. 31^a, with a cadence in B minor.

Movement 13^{III}, an aria that is no longer extant, inserted as a replacement for 13 or 13^{II}.

Movement 14 in G major instead of A major.

Movements 15–32 as in Version I.

Movement 33^{III}, evidently a ‘Sinfonia’ that is no longer extant, inserted as a replacement for movements 33–5.

Movements 36–9 as in Version I.

Movement 13^{III} must have been a tenor aria with string accompaniment and continuo (and without woodwinds) in a key that fitted in with the B minor of movement 12^c—at the same time making it necessary to transpose movement 14 from A major to G major (beginning in E minor instead of F# minor)—in other words, probably in E minor or G major. Since neither the aria ‘Ach, mein Sinn’ (movement 13) nor ‘Zerschmettert mich’ (movement 13^{II}) would have required this transposition, it must have been a completely different piece. It is impossible to say anything else about this movement.

Movement 33^{III} is even more mysterious. Apparently the entries in the parts have always been incomplete. However, the movement seems to have been a ‘Sinfonia’, and it is fairly certain that it was at least for violin I and continuo. There is (now) no reference whatsoever to the piece in the woodwind, violin II, and viola parts. Of course, inserts may well have existed, though the NB indication that is usually present in such cases is missing. That a sinfonia in fact filled in the gap between movements 32 and 36 can primarily be deduced from the fact that, whereas Bach’s copyists occasionally omitted an indication (in this case ‘Sinfonia tacet’ or even ‘Sinfonia vide sub Signo . . .’) in some of the parts, they were not given to including references to a non-existent movement in the others.

Some of the changes in the scoring of this version were probably makeshift arrangements that became necessary on account of missing instruments or players. They cannot be interpreted as a change of taste

on the part of Bach. This is particularly true in the case of the violas d'amore in movements 19 and 20, which were replaced by solo violins with mutes, and in that of the lute in movement 19, which was replaced by obbligato organ.

4. VERSION IV (C.1749)

The evidence of the composer's own handwriting suggests that this latest version, which is transmitted in original parts, can only come from the last years of Bach's life.

It is characterized by the restoration of the inserts from St Matthew's Gospel with all that this entails, including the final chorale (movement 40); by the accrual of a number of additional performing parts; and by certain textual alterations in movements based on free poetry.

Thus Bach to all intents and purposes returns to Version I. Only movement 33 is retained in the enlarged state of Version II (i.e. the text comes from St Matthew and not from St Mark). With regard to the increase in the number of performing parts, the possibility can of course not be wholly excluded that in the process some of the older parts were discarded. However, it is far more likely that Bach envisaged an enlargement of the instrumental forces employed. Hence the following were added to the forces previously required:

- 1 desk violin I
- 1 desk viola
- 1 desk continuo
- 1 harpsichord (perhaps Bach had hitherto played from the score)

One of the existing continuo parts was arranged 'pro Bassono grosso', i.e. for double bassoon (although the interpretation 'for ripieno bassoon' cannot altogether be ruled out)¹³. It remains unclear which instrument was intended to replace the original lute part in movement 19. Bach seems to have vacillated between the harpsichord (a part was newly written out for Version IV) and the organ (a late autograph addition to the organ part of Version III states: 'To be played on the organ with 8' and 4' Gedackt'), though his final preference never became clearly apparent. However, as in Version III, he had to find a makeshift replacement for the missing lute.

¹³ In a concerto for recorder, viola da gamba, and strings by Georg Philipp Telemann (Darmstadt, Mus. 1033/59), the term 'Violino grosso' is used for ripieno violins I and II. I am indebted to Klaus Hofmann (Göttingen) for this information.

The textual changes, which will be examined in greater detail when discussing the text (Ch. III.2.d), and which are reproduced on pp. 174–7, initially concern movements 9, 19, and 20. Further textual changes (in movement 39) were probably only made after Bach's death, though it is possible to trace the idea back to Version IV.

A common feature of these textual revisions is their striving for greater rationality. Much of the pictorial quality of the original text, which Bach reproduced with the help of musical figures, is jettisoned, and the congruity of text and music suffers as a result. It is therefore questionable whether Bach himself was prompted to make these changes, or whether he was forced to make them on account of an injunction from the church authorities.

5. SCORE A

In view of its complex origins it is not possible to classify the original score A as a separate 'version'.

Towards the end of the 1730s Bach began to replace the original score of the St John Passion, which we will call X, with a new copy, A. On fo. 10 this autograph section A ends in the middle of movement 10 (b. 42^a, Evangelist, tenth semiquaver; continuo, third crotchet). The score must have remained in this state until Bach, in the last years of his life, had it completed by a copyist in conjunction with the preparation of the parts for Version IV.

Thus Score A consists of two heterogeneous sections. The autograph beginning is to all intents and purposes based on Versions I = IV, though there are numerous differences which show that the composer was intent on making certain improvements. A general overview is provided by the *NBA*, which prints two versions of movements 1 to 10: appendix 1 in principle reproduces Version I, whereas the main text reproduces the version of score A. However, the reader is referred to Mendel, *KB*, which contains more detailed information.

As far as can be ascertained, the rest of the score, which was not written by Bach, is a copy of the lost original score X. Thus it is also based on Version I, and in fact far more closely than the autograph section, for the notion that the copyist made improvements and alterations can be excluded. Of course, it is quite conceivable that Bach also made changes to X after 1724, which now appear in A as uncorrected original entries. This is true, for example, of movement 33, which appears in A in the

longer version that we know from Versions II and IV. Significantly, Bach had to step in when it came to writing the continuo. It seems that the alterations in X had made it illegible.

Finally, Bach revised the section written by the copyist, though he did not examine it all in the same detail. Some movements were carefully revised, though the majority were either checked superficially or not at all.

This suggests an obvious conclusion. Bach's final revision of the Passion was never completed. Most of its readings never found their way into the original set of parts, and thus were never played during Bach's lifetime. The inconsistent perusal of the section of the score written by the copyist certainly cannot pass for the revision that never took place.

It is difficult to say why Bach broke off work on the new copy. Mendel, *KB* (p. 75) refers to the well-known incident on 17 March 1739. The Council servant brings Bach the news that 'the music he was planning to perform on the forthcoming Good Friday was not to be played until he had received due permission to do so, whereupon the latter replied that it had always been done thus, it was of no particular interest to him, for it did him no good whatsoever, and it was only a burden. He would tell the superintendent that he had been forbidden to perform it. If there were objections to the text, why, it had already been performed several times before.'

Bach normally made a new copy of a score only for a forthcoming performance. However, the 1739 incident is only one of the possible reasons why the work was discontinued. The following questions need to be asked:

Would the time from 17 to 27 March (Good Friday) have sufficed for the completion of the score and for copying a new set of parts?

Did Bach, if he in fact discontinued work on the score in 1739, perform no Passion at all? Did he perform a different work? Or did he perform the St John Passion after all, using an older set of parts?

Lack of time could also have led Bach to discontinue work on the copy, though this would not necessarily have been in 1739.

An examination of the watermarks involved points to a date that is very close to this, 18 January 1740 (see Ch. II.2 and Weiß, 105). This would seem to confirm Mendel's hypothesis, though it does not exclude the adjacent years, especially 1740.

Finally, the state of the score creates problems when it comes to producing an edition of the work, and for modern performances.

Producing an Edition

The ‘cleanest’ solution would of course be to publish two separate versions: the one transmitted in the original parts (and in the section of score A not in Bach’s hand), and the other transmitted in the autograph section of score A. Some scholars have in fact suggested that this should be done.¹⁴ But even if we disregard the fact that such a publication could not be used for a performance (see below), there are other problems which suggest that a differentiated edition of this kind is not the ideal solution. For example, the autograph section of the score has no transverse flutes, and movement 9 contains no scoring indications.¹⁵ Presumably this was merely an oversight on Bach’s part that was occasioned by the state of the original score and which is easy to rectify with reference to the original set of parts. However, a new edition that sets out to make a precise distinction between the various source layers must print Bach’s discontinued revision without transverse flutes. This would be tantamount to sanctioning something that is quite improbable merely in order to adhere to certain predetermined principles.¹⁶

Thus it would be much better if the editor were to reproduce the results of his critical scrutiny of the sources in the form of a publication that can be used for performances, and to include a detailed account of the transmission in a critical report—instead of merely editing the raw material and leaving the task of piecing together a version of the work capable of being used by the would-be performer.

Modern Performance Practice

With reference to specific details it is possible to demonstrate that the changes in the autograph section of the score do not constitute a significantly different version, if by this we mean changes in the composer’s whole attitude to the work. Rather, they are minor improvements and subtle emendations that should not be discarded unless it is absolutely necessary to do so. As in the case of Mozart’s Requiem and many other works of a similar kind, the fragmentary character of the

¹⁴ e.g., Christoph Wolff, in Kurt von Fischer (ed.), *Bach im 20. Jahrhundert: Bericht des Symposiums Kassel, 1984* (Kassel, 1985), 13: ‘I am of the opinion that . . . that which is fragmentary should remain fragmentary.’

¹⁵ See App. I.

¹⁶ The strikingly similar state of affairs in Part 2 of the Christmas Oratorio (see App. I) has not as yet led to a call for the separate publication of the version presented in the score (which does not include flutes).

revised version will simply have to be accepted for what it is. Whenever score A fails to give the performer the information he needs, he will in principle rely on Version IV of the original parts, though with the proviso that Bach's initial intentions must take precedence over what were presumably makeshift measures. Certain examples of this are discussed in Chapter III. 5 below.