

A Study Guide to *Performing the Passion*

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Performing the Passion is a documentary produced by Margot Fassler and Jacqueline C. Richard at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music in 2009. It features a contemporary performance of the 1725 version of J.S. Bach's *St. John Passion*, conducted by Simon Carrington. Performers and scholars from Yale University and elsewhere appear in the film. They describe and reflect upon this great work of musical art and the experience of performing it.

Opening

1. *How familiar are you with the music of JS Bach? With the St. John Passion? (very familiar, somewhat familiar, not at all familiar) What do you find engaging about Bach's music, if you are familiar with it?*
2. *If you were preparing a creative musical presentation of the Passion today, what themes would you want to bring forward and why?*

View the Video (Part I)

Reflect and Discuss

1. In the 1725 version, shown in the video, the first theme that appears is human sinfulness and the call to repentance ("Humankind, bewail your great sin."). Later, we hear about Peter's betrayal and the joy and difficulty of being a follower of Jesus. *How do these themes compare to the ones you identified before watching the video? In your view, how do the themes of the Passion that Bach brings forward—the sin of humankind and the path of discipleship—affirm or challenge audiences today?*
2. Several aspects of musical preparation for performing the Passion were discussed in the video: how rehearsals are ordered, how soloists prepare for their roles, vocal techniques, etc. *What impressed you as you watched these preparations for performing the Passion? Were there any surprises or questions raised for you? Discuss the implications of what was said in the film concerning musicianship.*
3. At one point in the video the observation is made that for Bach's audience, "The chorales are the high point." *Why was this the case? For you as a listener today, how do the various musical forms (recitative, arias, chorales) make a difference in how you engage with the music? With the story?*

4. In its original liturgical setting, the first part of the Passion was followed by a one hour sermon. *Why do you think the sermon was inserted here, rather than at the end of the work? If you had to preach after having heard this much of the story, what sort of message would you proclaim?*

BREAK

View the Video (Part II)

Reflect and Discuss

1. The charge that Bach's St. John's Passion is anti-Jewish is discussed in the video. *What facts or observations in that discussion particularly impressed you? According to Christian theology "all of mankind is responsible" for the Passion. This means that no one group bears the blame for the death of Jesus. Do you think this is well understood today? Why or why not?*

2. Rather than dwelling on the violence of the crucifixion, St. John's Passion presents us with an account of the glorification of the Son of God. *How is the glorious quality of the Passion expressed in Bach's portrayal? When the viola da gamba accompanies the words of Jesus from the cross "It is finished" what feeling does the music evoke in you? What is finished?*

3. A commenter in the video says "The hero of Judah, Jesus, has won the struggle for all of us." Bach expresses the intensity of this triumph in the music. But he then returns to the very intimate and personal response of the believer—a mixture of sorrow and hope. *Why do you suppose Bach did not simply end on a triumphant note? Why do "floods of tears" follow, and what does this say about our human response to the Passion?*

4. A Eucharistic theology emerges in the final portion of Bach's musical work. Jesus is the Paschal lamb; sins are forgiven and death is overcome through his suffering and triumph. *How are these elements related to the Lord's Supper / celebration of the Eucharist, as you understand it?*

5. The motet by Jacob Handl, inspired by Isaiah 57, starts with the words: "Behold how the righteous one dies / and no one takes notice; / the righteous are taken away, / and no one pays attention." *What does this text reveal about Christ's Passion? What response does this ending invite from the listener?*

Conclusion

For further reading

To learn more about Bach's St. John Passion:

MARKUS RATHEY, "Johann Sebastian Bach's St. John Passion from 1725: A Liturgical Interpretation"

<http://ism.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Johann%20Sebastian%20BachG%C3%87%C3%96s%20St.pdf>

To learn more about the issues involved in the portrayal of the Jews in the Passion:

MARY BOYS, "Jews, Christians, and the Death of Jesus"

<http://ismreview.yale.edu/article/jews-christians-and-the-passion-of-jesus/>

To learn more about the unique character of St. John's passion account in Scripture:

RAYMOND BROWN, "The Passion According to John" *Worship* 49 (March 1975) 126-134

This handout relates to the texts and videos for "A Study Guide to *Performing the Passion*" *The Yale ISM Review*, Volume I, Number 2, April 2, 2015

The Yale ISM Review: Exploring Sacred Music, Worship, and the Arts
<http://ismreview.yale.edu/>