Pre-U/OCR: Bach's St John Passion

KS5

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What does this resource cover?

After an initial exploration of the background to Bach's *St John Passion*, this resource will cover specific numbers, in accordance with the requirements of the Cambridge Pre-U specification. This could also be useful for OCR teachers covering AoS4 (Religious music of the Baroque period).

The numbers covered will be as follows:

NBA no	BWV no	Type		Title
1	1	Chorus		Herr unser Herrscher
8	12	Recitative	Extended sequence 1	Simon Petrus aber folgete Jesu nach
9	13	Aria		Ich folge dir gleichfalls
10	14	Recitative		Derselbige Jünger war dem Hohenpriester bekannt
11	15	Chorale		Wer hat dich so geschlagen
12a	16	Recitative		Und Hannas sandte ihn gebunden
12b	17	Chorus		Bist du nicht seiner Jünger einer?
12c	18	Recitative		Er leugnete aber und sprach
13	19	Aria		Ach, mein Sinn
16a	22	Recitative	Extended sequence 2	Da führeten sie Jesum
16b	23	Chorus		Wäre dieser nicht ein Übeltäter
16c	24	Recitative		Da sprach Pilatus zu ihnen
16d	25	Chorus		Wir dürfen niemand töten
16e	26	Recitative		Auf daß erfüllet würde das Wort
17	27	Chorale		Ach großer König
18a	28	Recitative		Da sprach Pilatus zu ihm
18b	29	Chorus		Nicht diesen, sondern Barrabam
18c	30	Recitative		Barrabas aber war ein Mörder
19	31	Arioso		Betrachte, meine Seel
20	32	Aria		Erwäge, wie sein blutgefärbeter Rücken
21a	33	Recitative		Und die Kriegsknechte flochten eine Krone
21b	34	Chorus		Se gegrüßet, lieber Jüdenkönig
21c	35	Recitative		Und gaben ihm Backenstreiche
21d	36	Chorus		Kreuzige, kreuzige!
21e	37	Recitative		Pilatus sprach zu ihnen
21f	38	Chorus		Wir haben ein Gesetz
21g	39	Recitative		Da Pilatus das Wort hörete
22	40	Chorale		Durch dein Gefängnis, Gottes Sohn
30	58	Aria		Es ist vollbracht!
37	65	Chorale		O hilf, Christe, Gottes Sohn
39	67	Chorus		Ruht wohl, ihe heiligen Gebeine
40	68	Chorale		Ach Herr, laß dein lieb Engelein

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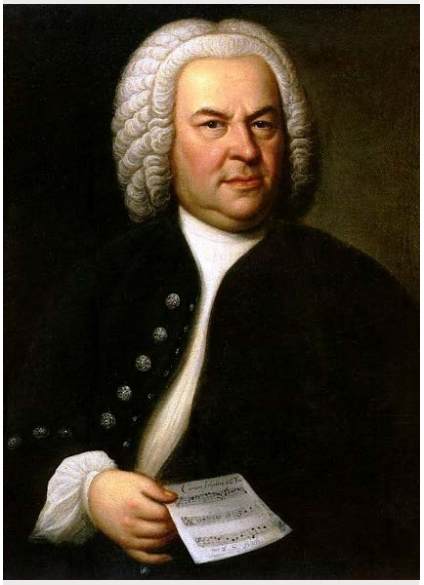

What is a Passion?

In modern times, the word 'passion' has come to mean a very strong emotion. However, its root is in the Latin verb 'patior', meaning to suffer or endure (from where we also derive the word patience). The archaic meaning of the word 'passion' refers to the suffering of Christ, and the story of the crucifixion. This story is covered in all four gospels. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell it in a similar, factual way. However, John, the most visionary of the gospel writers, gives quite a different narrative, focusing on Christ's role as the redeemer of mankind rather than telling a simple story of his suffering.

The tradition of reading the passion story on Good Friday goes back many centuries, and by the mid-14th century there was an established tradition of passion plays in central Europe, with people taking different characters and acting out the narrative. Purely musical versions existed too. Before the Reformation, these were sung in Latin, to plainchant or to more elaborate a cappella settings with a mixture of plainchant, homophony and polyphony.

The Reformation

The Reformation was a breakaway movement in which German Christians, initially led by Martin Luther in 1517, challenged the dogma and practices of the Catholic church. From Lutheranism there grew many other Protestant movements, including the Church of England from 1529. There are many subtle theological differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. However, the one that perhaps had the most impact on composers was the shift in language from Latin to the vernacular. Previously, church services were conducted in Latin – the language of educated people in Europe. Protestants believed that the congregation should be able to understand – and play an active part in – what was happening in church, so changed their services to be in the local language. The tradition of hymn-singing also grew up at this time, often using melodies derived from folk tunes that congregations would know, and with a repetitive verse structure that enabled them to actively participate in religious music.

After the Reformation in Germany, the sung passion evolved into an oratorio-style piece, with a mixture of non-biblical and gospel text, interspersed with congregational chorales (hymns). The earliest well-known composer of German oratorio-passions was Heinrich Schütz, whose passions were first performed in Dresden in the 1660s. The earliest oratorio passion sung in Leipzig was Johann Kuhnau's *St Mark Passion* in 1721.

JS Bach and his passions

Bach was appointed to the prestigious role of Cantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig in 1723, and held the position until his death in 1750. His job there included teaching music and Latin at the Thomasschule, playing the organ, writing music for the church, and training the musicians, not only at the Thomaskirche but also at the city's Nicolaikirche, as well as two other churches.

Both of his existing, complete passions are from his time at the Thomaskirche. The *St John Passion* was written first, with its first performance in 1724. The perhaps better-known *St Matthew Passion* came later, in 1727. The *St Matthew Passion* is longer, with a more meditative character, and remained almost entirely unrevised after its first performance. The *St John Passion*, by contrast, is shorter and more turbulent, its text coming from a wider variety of sources. It was also revised extensively by Bach: the version most often performed today is his final revision, from 1749.

Bach was a deeply religious man with an excellent understanding of theology. He was no jobbing composer merely churning out what his employers wanted to hear: his church music is suffused with layers of religious meaning. The fact that he revised the *St John Passion* more than any of his other pieces seems to indicate that it held a special significance for him.

The text of the *St John Passion* comes from chapters 18 and 19 of the gospel of St John, Psalm 8, and poetry by Christian Weise, Heinrich Postel and Barthold Heinrich Brockes.

The structure of the *St John Passion*

The *St John Passion* is in two parts. The Good Friday vespers service, at which it would have been performed, puts parts one and two on either side of the sermon.

The action of the narrative has five sections:

Part 1	1	The arrest of Jesus, Kidron Valley	NBA 1-5
	2	The denial, Palace of Caiaphas	6-14
Part 2	3	Court hearing with Pontius Pilate	15-26
	4	Crucifixion and death in Golgotha	27-37
	5	Burial	38-40

The gospel narrative is told by the Evangelist, a tenor, who literally takes on the voice of St John. A bass soloist takes on all the other male roles (except for a tenor servant), including Jesus, Peter and Pontius Pilate. There are also soprano, alto, tenor and bass soloists who sing ariosos and arias that provide a commentary on the action. A four-part SATB chorus plays the part of soldiers, priests and crowds, while at other times they, too, provide a commentary on the narrative. Another layer of commentary is added by the chorales, sung by the congregation.

Analysis

1: Chorus – 'Herr unser Herrscher'

This long chorus demonstrates some of the key features of Bach's style, which we will be able to spot later when they reoccur in other numbers. One of the striking features about the opening is the way that Bach immediately creates a sense of forward motion and an overwhelming feeling of unease. He achieves this through a clever combination of techniques:

- The semiquaver movement in the violins, usually in 3rds, which can be described as a 'Baroque turn' with four-note patterns revolving around a median note. This movement carries on for almost the whole chorus, mostly in the orchestra, but sometimes in the voices too.
- The plangent dissonance in the oboes. Some of these work as conventional suspensions, with preparation and resolution by a falling step. Others do not follow this pattern, however, and are unprepared, or approached or quitted by leap. The overall effect is of the mournful oboes weaving across the top of the texture.
- The use of pedal notes: the first nine bars feature a wealth of changing harmonies over a tonic pedal. This provides an anchor for all the turbulence happening above, as well as helping to establish the tonality.
- The use of diatonic cycles of 5ths. The cycle of 5ths is the ultimate expression of the power of the dominant-tonic relationship, providing an inexorable sense of forward motion, especially when paired with a descending melodic sequence. The first example is heard at the end of the orchestral introduction, starting in bar 10. The tonic pedal is abandoned in favour of a move to the dominant bass note (D), followed by G, C, F, B flat and finally E natural and E flat. The A that would then follow is implied through the use of a suspension in the bass in bar 17, followed by a D chord in bar 18 to provide a perfect cadence as we return to a G minor chord with the vocal entry in bar 19. It's always worth looking at the bassline to help work out the underlying harmony, especially when there's so much dissonance happening. Bach puts cycles of 5ths underneath descending sequences so often that if you spot a sequence, it's worth checking the chords that go with it.

The music of the introduction is repeated under the bold vocal entry at bar 19. Two things are always worth looking out for with any type of vocal music: first, where the highest notes are placed, and second, which words are set using melismas. Voices have more power and energy the higher in their range they sing, so composers tend to use this to enhance the meaning of the words. The very first entry of the chorus sopranos has a punchy impact for this very reason. Likewise, melismas place emphasis on a particular word simply by giving it more airtime: the first example of this is on the word 'Herrscher' (master). This example also transfers the anxious 'turn' idea from the orchestra into the vocal parts for the first time.

Texture is also crucial to word-setting. Words are easier to hear in homophonic settings. When we have a different, imitative, texture from bar 33, the text used is a repetition of what we've already heard. The voice parts come in one at a time, giving the listener no ambiguity about the fact that we are hearing a repetition of the previous text.

After the pause in bar 58, we have a repetition of the imitative idea in what feels like a shift to E flat major. However, this doesn't last long, and we slide back into G minor, with a lengthy dominant pedal from bar 71. Some more cycles of 5ths appear before we land on a dominant chord at bar 95, ready for the da capo.

8 (12) to 13 (19): first extended sequence – Peter's denial

The tiny opening recitative that starts this sequence provides excellent examples of some of the key features of Bach's recitatives:

- Recitativo secco: accompanied with sparse chords played by the continuo group only (bassline and chords – most likely, but not necessarily, played by cello and harpsichord/organ). This supports the vocal line harmonically without detracting from the narration.
- No repetition of the words: this is a syllabic setting, with the singer having the freedom to follow the natural speech-rhythm of the text.
- The use of first inversion chords so as to be just a little more harmonically ambiguous than if they were root position, and to allow rapid modulation where necessary.
- An upward melodic trajectory at the start of the recitative, with an initial rising interval, and a descending shape at the end.
- A strong cadence at the end of the recitative, this time with root position chords, and a standard cadential approach (Ic-V7-I in this case).

The aria No. 9 (13) ('Ich folge dir gleichfalls') follows Bach's standard format of solo voice, continuo and obbligato instrument(s) – in this case, flute. This aria would have originally been sung by a boy treble rather than a soprano. The recitatives are what move the story forwards: in the arias, the narrative pauses and we get some commentary on the action. This aria extols the virtue of following Christ. Notice the word-painting simply in the way that the voice and the flute interact, and in the echo of the pitches of the preceding recitative in the opening melody. The voice picks up the melody played by the flute in the introduction, and is immediately imitated a beat later by the flute. The flute keeps the semiquaver movement going in the breaks between the vocal phrases. Thus the flute and the voice are perpetually following each other, fitting exactly with the text.

In terms of structure, this is a typical da capo aria, with a middle section that goes to the relative minor and the dominant minor, before a return of the opening idea in the home key of B flat in bar 113. Notice the melisma emphasising the word 'schieben' (push or nudge), with the pairs of notes giving another lovely example of word-painting.

The recitative that follows (No. 10 or 14) contains Peter's first denial. It demonstrates the simplicity of Jesus's recitative; you could compare it to Jesus's recitatives in the *St Matthew Passion*, where they are always accompanied by a 'halo' of strings. The use of inversions again allows Bach the flexibility to modulate freely.

The chorales in Bach's passions exist outside the timeframe of the action, and provide another layer of devotional commentary, while allowing the congregation to take part in the proceedings. The harmonisation is characteristically rich, with frequent modulation and use of chromatic harmony. The orchestra doubles the choir's harmony: the congregation would join in with the melody.

The next chorus (No. 12b or 16) is an example of a 'turba' chorus, where they take on the role of a crowd or mob. In this instance, they are the high priests needling Peter about his status as one of Jesus's disciples. The texture is fundamentally fugal, but notice how Bach weaves in extra imitative entries of the words 'bist du nicht' ('are you not') to maximise the irritation of their taunts. This chorus leads directly into the following recitative, containing Peter's second and third denials. There are two excellent examples of word-painting in this recitative. The first portrays the cock crowing, with a rising F#7 chord followed immediately by a jarring leap down to a low B. The second is perhaps the best example of chromaticism in one of Bach's recitatives, on the word 'weinete' ('wept'). Bach, the master of the chromatic bassline, treats us to both an ascending and descending version, while the often syncopated vocal line provides plenty of mournful dissonance above.

The following brief aria (No. 13 or 19) shows Peter's anguish and remorse over his denial of Jesus. The dotted rhythms and angular contours reflect his agitation. Notice at bar 47 the long vocal note at the end of the phrase 'Bleib ich hier' ('Shall I stay') and the leaping shape of the following phrase 'oder wünsch ich mir Berg' ('or leave the mountains'). The chorale that closes Part 1 asks for a firmer conscience than that demonstrated by Peter.

16a (22) to 21g (39): second extended sequence – Jesus at Pontius Pilate's court

Part two of the *St John Passion* opens with a chorale (No. 15 or 21), which summarises the action so far, and tells us that false accusations are coming up. The extended sequence that follows includes some of the most thrilling 'turbae' choruses, as the baying mob whips itself into a frenzy inside Pilate's court. The first of these, 16b (23), starts off with a homophonic texture so that we can hear the text: the rising chromatic figure in the bass on the word 'übeltäter' ('malefactor') becomes increasingly prominent in the more contrapuntal lines that follow. For example, at bar 14 there are imitative entries of the word in alto and soprano, while the bass shadows with an inversion. From bar 25 the 'übeltäter' idea is combined with a new melodic idea to create an even greater sense of rising anger in the crowd.

A seamless link into a short recitative leads straight through to another chorus (No. 16d or 25), very similar musically to the previous one. This time, the jittery crowd states 'we must not kill anyone', with a rising chromatic line on the word 'töten' ('kill') and a semiquaver violin countermelody flitting agitatedly at the top of the texture. The subsequent recitative reinforces the overarching characterisation of Jesus within the *St John Passion* as a heavenly king: 'Mein Reich is nicht von dieser Welt' ('My kingdom is not of this world'). The following chorale (No. 17 or 27) takes up this theme, and is one of the most beautiful examples of quaver movement in Bach's basslines.

The following recitative sees Pilate pressing Jesus about his role as a king, and finding no fault in him. Pilate suggests that he might release Jesus in the tradition of letting one prisoner go free at Passover. The chorus suggest Barabbas instead, again with the agitated violin semiquavers. The recitative 18c (30) features another astonishing example of word-painting on the word 'geißelte' ('scourged'). The 49-note melisma uses 11 out of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale, and covers a range of a compound tritone, over lurching dotted rhythms in the continuo.

No. 19 (31) is an arioso. Literally meaning 'airy', an arioso falls somewhere between a recitative and an aria. The text is treated to a mostly syllabic setting, with similar melodic fingerprints as the recitatives, and mostly without repetition. The accompaniment, however, is developed beyond the simple chords of the 'secco' style. Here, Bach writes intertwining parts for two violas d'amore. The viola d'amore is one of the smaller members of the viol family, without frets and played under the chin like a violin. Its plaintive, soft tone is particularly suited to Jesus's acceptance of his fate. The moving semiquavers in the continuo, together with the softly treading quavers in the bass, underpin the ties over the barlines in the viola d'amore parts, with their dissonance on every half bar. In some performances, a lute replaces the harpsichord for this movement, as its timbre melds so effectively with that of the violas.

The same instrumental set-up accompanies the following tenor aria (No. 20 or 32), which expands on the topic of Christ's sacrifice bringing salvation to the world. It is another conventional da capo aria, in which the violas d'amore are used as obbligato instruments in equal partnership with the cello, which has a considerable amount of the imitative melodic material.

After a short recitative, during which the crown of thorns is placed on Jesus's head, we enter a sequence that presents points of symmetry around the central chorale (No. 22 or 40).

21b	34	Chorus	Mirrors 25b – explains the law
21c	35	Recitative	
21d	36	Chorus	'Kreuzige' ('Crucify') chorus
21e	37	Recitative	
21f	38	Chorus	Mirrors 23b – both share musical material and call for crucifixion
21g	39	Recitative	
22	40	Chorale	The central point of the Passion: the 'Victory of the Cross'
23a	41	Recitative	
23b	42	Chorus	Mirror of 21f
23c	43	Recitative	
23d	44	Chorus	Mirror 'kreuzige' chorus
23e	45	Recitative	
23f	46	Chorus	
23g	47	Recitative	
24	48	Aria	
25a	49	Recitative	
25b	50	Chorus	Mirrors 21b – reminds Pilate that he is being challenged by someone claiming to be a king

No. 21b (34) demonstrates Bach's mastery of the fugal form in serving the narrative. The entries of the subject are in stretto (overlapped) from the start, a technique that's usually seen much later in a fugue. This allows Bach to condense the musical content while at the same time communicating the mob's eagerness to taunt Jesus. After a recitative in which Pilate again asserts that he finds no fault with Jesus, we hear the first 'Kreuzige chorus' (No. 21d or 36). This contrasts two separate iterations of 'Crucify!': one with descending minims with paired parts providing suspensions on every second beat, and the other with shorter note-values and wide leaps, treated in imitation. The effect created is one of a crazed mob. Pilate's humanity is emphasised in the following recitative, in which he questions the crowd's desire for the crucifixion of a man in which he finds no fault. The crowd – somewhat pompously – explain that it is required by law, using a textbook fugue in F major.

Pilate consults with Jesus once again in the following recitative, who makes it clear that it is God's will, rather than Pilate's, that decrees he must die. The chorale that follows (No. 22 or 40) is the central point of the whole Passion. It is a discussion of freedom and captivity, and of the belief that Jesus died to redeem mandkind. It's no accident that Bach chose the key of E major for this chorale. Each key signature is formed of four crosses, in a cross formation – the kind of symbolism that Bach is known to have enjoyed. In the manuscript score there are ten staves, giving a total of 40 crosses on the left hand side of the page. It is also the point of musical symmetry in the mirror structure outlined above: the defining moment at which there is no going back on the path to Christ's crucifixion.

No. 30 (48) Aria: 'Es is vollbracht'

Perhaps the most famous aria in the *St John passion*, this alto solo takes Jesus's last words ('It is finished') and expands upon them in a shortened da capo structure with a viola da gamba obbligato. The viola da gamba (literally 'viol for the leg') is a fretted viol played like a cello (although there is no spike). It is chosen here for its delicate sound. The molto adagio of the opening section in B minor is suitably gloomy, so when the tempo changes to vivace for the central section, together with a switch to triple time and D major, it comes as something of a shock. Bach presents Jesus as a victor in this section with the strings sounding like jubilant trumpets, before an abridged return to the opening idea.

No. 37 (65) Chorale: 'O hilf, Christe, Gottes Sohn'

This chorale is interesting in its harmonic ambiguity. Many of its cadences are imperfect, meaning that they end on major chords even though the predominant mode is minor. The melody itself is in F Phrygian, but the harmony, with its many F major chords, either includes many tierces de Picardie, or is implying an underlying B flat minor tonality. However you choose to explain the harmony, the ambiguity reflects the anguish of the text vividly.

Nos 39 (67) and 40 (68) Final chorus: 'Ruht wohl, ihe heiligen Gebeine' and chorale: 'Ach Herr, laß dein lieb Engelein'

The final chorus ('Rest well') is an extended da capo structure, essentially ABABA. The texture is mostly homophonic: it would be possible to compare this chorus with a chorale in the same way that an arioso can be compared with a recitative. It is more elaborate than a chorale in the same way that an arioso is more elaborate than a recitative, but there are many similarities. The gentle sway of the triple time compliments another reiteration of the central religious theme of the Passion.

The final chorale could not be more contrasting with No. 37 (65). This one is unequivocably in E flat major, abounding in perfect cadences, and with tenors and sopranos singing in a high tessitura. The last two perfect cadences are brightened further by one of Bach's favourite harmonic progressions: II7-V-I, with the major version of chord ii. This could also be expressed as a secondary dominant, labelled V7 of V-V-I: either way, the effect is suitably bright for a chorale that puts Jesus firmly on his heavenly throne and promises eternal praise.