Anti-Semitism in Bach’s *St. John Passion*

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There is some controversy surrounding Johann Sebastian Bach in reference to his *St. John Passion*. It has been argued that Bach shows some anti-Semitism through the musical elements and lyrics of this oratorio. This paper has researched the history of Passion pieces and Bach’s life in Leipzig to interpret the music and words using the correct context of his era. The historical research is helpful to have a deeper understanding of how Jews were considered in Leipzig around 1727, which is when Bach published his *Passion*.

The research also addresses the reason why people believe Bach shows signs of anti-Semitism in the *St. John Passion*. The musical elements are analyzed especially during the section of the Choruses in which “the Jews” are singing. It has been determined that the powerful or dissonant musical styles are meant to give a dramatic expression rather than subtly voice a negative opinion of a particular racial and religious group.

Finally, the *St. John Passion* is compared and contrasted with other pieces that tell the story of Jesus’ crucifixion to find any similarities between them. Other Passion pieces depict “the Jews” as a loud and stubborn chorus because of the Biblical relevance, so it is odd that Bach is being criticized for it when others compose similarly. With all of the research, it is determined that even though we do not know Bach’s true opinions, they are not shown in his composition of the *St. John Passion*.

Johann Sebastian Bach’s *St. John Passion* is the most controversial of his Passions because of its supposedly anti-Semitic libretto and orchestration. Robert Gehrenbeck, the conductor of the Wisconsin Chamber choir of 2010, held a performance and panel discussion to examine the piece and answer controversial questions about Bach’s alleged anti-Semitism.1 Through listening to the dissonant music paired with the text from Lutheran scripture and Bach’s own libretto, many listeners can create their own opinions on whether or not the oratorio is offensive. To form a non-biased opinion, one must understand Bach’s religious history, the standard attitude towards Jews in Bach’s time and location, and the various musical elements in the *St. John Passion*. My interpretation is that even though there are some signs of dissonance and repetition in the turba choruses in which “the Jews” are singing, the piece in its entirety is not anti-Semitic because of Bach’s varied use of those same elements in different sections of the oratorio.

In his statements to Stockinger in *The Well-Tempered Ear*, Gehrenbeck does not answer the question “Are Bach and the *St. John Passion* anti-Semitic?” with a simple “yes” or “no” answer, but rather states that any conclusion to those claims is very complex. Adding to the complexity, each listener, performer, or conductor can have his or her own ideas regarding the piece, whether they are positive or negative. Examples of the latter include several incidences of performers protesting their performances at the Boston Early Music Festival in the 1980s, Swarthmore College in 1995, and the Oregon Bach Festival in 2000. The turba choruses in which “the Jews” call for Jesus’ death use minor and diminished chords and text repetition based on scripture in contrast to the Chorales and Arias which are interpolated by Bach and are based on Lutheran theology. The intensity of the turba choruses leads the listener to be disturbed while the chorales and arias “re-interpret passages in light of the Lutheran theology of repentance and reconciliation.” Gehrenbeck comments on Bach’s Lutheranism and possible hostility towards Jews by referencing one of Bach’s other Cantatas written for the tenth Sunday after Trinity. This particular piece apparently does negatively reflect the contemporary Jews. However, whether or not Bach could have been anti-Semitic in other pieces of his is not relevant to his stance in the *St. John Passion*. To grasp a deeper understanding of his perspective of Jews we, must take a look at his background.

Research shows that the possibility of anti-Semitism in the *St. John Passion* was considered only after 1980. Therefore, many hypotheses arose because of a fear of Nazis and political incorrectness. Those who have an extremely limited knowledge of the German language are even offended by the words “die Jüden” because they believe it means “die, Jews.” This of course is utterly ridiculous since the complete translation of the German phrase is simply “the Jews.” To break free of any cultural and time-periodical bias, the Jews in Leipzig between 1720 and 1730 must be taken into account. This being the location and approximate time period in which Bach composed and published the oratorio. In Leipzig, Jews had to have special permission to live within the town limits. By the time Bach was writing the *St. John Passion*, six Jewish families had accumulated in the area for a total of thirty-six people. It is safe to assume that Bach rarely

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7 Raymond Erickson, “The Early Enlightenment, Jews, and Bach” *Musical Quarterly* 94 issue 4, 518.
9 Erickson, “The Early Enlightenment,” 525.
saw or interacted with any Jews during this time, so it would be rather difficult for him to have an educated judgment towards them. His opinions were most likely influenced by his belief and study of the Lutheran faith. The university in Leipzig had a tradition of theology, so the religious and theological discourse often influenced civic affairs. Based on the teachings of Martin Luther who had a very unreceptive view of Judaism, it is possible that Bach could have accepted that as truth. His personal outlook does not affect what he composes for Holy Week, since the week is meant to reflect one’s own Christianity and not subtly criticize other religions.

During this time, there was no Biblical criticism so Passions were recited one at a time on their respected days during Holy Week: St. Matthew was performed on Palm Sunday, St. Mark on Tuesday, St. Luke on Wednesday, and St. John on Good Friday. Therefore, the complete Passion story is not presented all at once, so the listener must fill in the details from the other Gospels. This is why we see Bach interpolate scripture from some of the other Gospels of Matthew and Mark and poetry from other Passion librettists such as Handel and Brockes. In the St. John Passion he used free poetry based on Lutheran theology in the form of the Chorales and Arias as his commentary on the Biblical narrative. Skimming the surface of the piece, one may imply that the disturbing quality of the choruses is indeed anti-Semitic, but the German musicologist Alfred Dürr explains the extreme musical qualities on a much deeper level. He states that there are two examples of the turba choruses in which they are based on Bach’s free poetry: Movements 1 and 39. No. 1 “Lord, Our Redeemer” shows the most dissonance so it is most relevant to this research. Dürr points out that the movement is in the key of G minor because Bach is expressing the crowd glorifying the Lord “in his abasement,” which means Jesus’ coming to Earth. Perhaps the most intriguing reason Bach used the dissonance in the orchestration is the presence of cruciform — the notes forming a cross shape — in the written score. This explains the dissonant held notes in the woodwinds as they create a cross in the music. An example of this can be found in the third beat in measure 56 to the first beat of measure 57 of the movement; the held notes are the horizontal and the ascending sixteenth notes are the vertical of the cross. This is also where the crowd sings the word “glorious” so Dürr is correct in saying “…Bach was obviously concerned to emphasize the connection between the cross and glory in musical terms.”

To analyze the entire piece further, the choruses are not the only sections that contain sustained harmonies and repetitive scripture. Moreover, “the Jews” do not sing the choral repetitions exclusively; the narrative choruses depict the Roman soldiers, chief priests, and “the Jews” at varied times. Other sections of the piece are musically diverse because Bach is expressing the

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10 Erickson, “The Early Enlightenment,” 526.
12 Macfarren, “J.S. Bach’s Music” iii.
13 Dürr, Genesis, Transmission, and Meaning 75.
14 Dürr, Genesis, Transmission, and Meaning 75.
16 Dürr, Genesis, Transmission, and Meaning 75.
17 Marissen, Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, 32.
distress and intensity of the text through obscure melodies and harmonies. An example of this diversity is presented in No. 19 when the Evangelist sings of Peter weeping after his denial because the melody is disjunct — it does not follow the typical smooth progression of intervals in the key signature. This movement is not from the Gospel of St. John, but it is actually from St. Matthew and is an interpolation from Bach in order to add the musical effect of remorse and lament. The Aria “Dissolve, O My Heart” is dissonant and expresses a sense of mourning which reflects the lyrics. Repetition is used for the lyrics “thy Jesus is dead” all while the orchestral parts go through many successions of leaps between minor and major intervals. Since both of these examples are interpolations from Bach, I believe that he used dissonance and repetition to provide musical expression rather than to convey any hostility towards the Jews.

The research expands further on one of the most controversial topics that may lead one to the conclusion of Bach’s anti-Semitism: the choral repetitions he uses whenever “the Jews” are demanding for Jesus’ death. The repetitions can be interpreted as stubbornness and “perfidy,” or “faithlessness,” of the Jews. Studies show that the perfidy has historical relevance according to Scripture because the crowds of Jews were in fact stubborn in begging for Jesus’ death. The St. John Passion is not even the first piece to use the historical perfidy to give voice to the crowd, nor is it the last to do so. Dating back to the 13th century, the Dominicans would perform sacred chants of the Gospels on their respected days, so the Gospel of St. John would be performed on Good Friday which, as stated before, continued all the way to the time of Bach. The earliest distribution of parts is from Gros livre in 1254 in which the words of Christ are spoken softly and the Jews’ turbae are chanted with loud and coarse voices. It is seen that the crowd is depicted as obstinate and faithless not only in St. John Passion but even in chants centuries before Bach. Even in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical Jesus Christ Superstar the music shows distress when the crowd is calling for the Crucifixion. There are too many examples of the crowd’s perfidy in other musical works to single out Bach’s oratorio as anti-Semitic and not accuse the same of any others.

With the complete evidence from the history of Passions, I have found that it was not uncommon to portray “the Jews” or “the crowd” as a harsh and stubborn group. The musical analysis shows that there are many ways to interpret the St. John Passion with a shallow musical knowledge, but with better understanding one can find that Bach used musical expression instead of Jewish prejudice. The culture of Bach’s time and location oppressed the Jews and preached the belief of Christian/Lutheran superiority, so I believe that there is a possibility for Bach’s personal anti-Judaism, but he did not express his views in the St. John Passion.

19 Dürr, Genesis, Transmission, and Meaning 34.
21 Marissen, Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, 32.
Bibliography


