

THE SACRED SACRIFICE

*Cultivating Lenten Traditions
with Bach's Great Passion*

Hannah Paris



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The Sacred Sacrifice: Cultivating Lenten Traditions with Bach's Great Passion

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Introduction

A signature floral Laura Ashley dress scratched my neck where it cinched tight, and I glanced sideways at my sister in her matching attire to see if she was feeling it too. The sheer black stockings covering my legs felt uncomfortably tight on my tummy, and my shoes were stiff. I sighed as sweat gathered behind my neck under my labored-over hair, undoubtedly frizzing it out. Why had I even tried with all those heating elements? This hair would not be tamed. My eyes wandered around the auditorium as I tried to distract myself from the physical discomforts by taking in what faces I could in the dim light. Music as familiar to me as the latest Disney soundtrack filled every inch of space. My sister scrunched up next to me on the pew, and I could already feel her body relaxing against mine settling into the annual *Messiah* slump. She would be asleep soon. I would follow her shortly with the image of my parents' joyful faces stamped on my mind.

Handel's *Messiah* was a constant in our house from the time Christmas music started until New Year's Day when the decora-

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INTRODUCTION

tions came down. It played in our Volvo when Mom picked me up from school, the car smelling of leather and cinnamon Dentyne gum. If Sandi Patty and Wayne Watson were coming to Charlotte, North Carolina with the Young Messiah production, we'd be there. Every year my parents would find a live performance and every year, no matter how hard we tried, both my sister and I fell asleep, her head on my shoulder and my head on the cold wood at the end of the pew. When the "Hallelujah" chorus began and the audience rose to their feet as one body, we would find ourselves jarred into alertness. After clearing our heads from the blood rush, we finished our annual tradition by giggling quietly together at yet another year of being brutally awakened by one of the most phenomenal musical compositions in history. Eventually, we joined everyone in singing, but really, we simply didn't have the ears to hear its crushing beauty at the time.

I wanted that for my own children. I wanted Handel's *Messiah* to be deeply familiar to them and part of the rhythm of Christmas. I also wanted my girls to love the words and understand the structure. I wanted to give them the ears to hear, if I possibly could. When I married, my husband and I almost immediately began merging our Christmas traditions to create a season of expectation for ourselves and our children. Naturally, that meant incorporating the timeless oratorio. For the first few years, I took my mom's route and played it often and everywhere. Then I heard tale of Cindy Rollins's *Hallelujah: Cultivating Advent Traditions with Handel's Messiah*. It sounded like exactly what I needed to help all of us dig deep into both the music itself, and Advent as a whole; to quietly and with the beauty of art draw us into Christmas morning prepared to worship. Our years of following Rollins's listening guide have been full and peaceful. The girls know the *Messiah* better and better each year, remembering background details and looking forward to lesser-known songs that they know and love because it sounds like sheep frolicking or roads going crooked. Two years of hyper-prepped hearts for Christmas through Advent were followed by Easters that snuck up and caught us totally unprepared.

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Day 2—Thursday

(9 minutes)

Now we enter the clear start of the narrative with the Evangelist. He's going to walk us through the story as the primary narrator.

Today you'll experience everything this oratorio has to offer: character solos, the choir in full form, a chorale, and response numbers including an *accompagnato* recitative or "accompanied recitative" and an aria. The oratorio has a handful of main characters we'll hear from repeatedly: the Evangelist, Jesus, and Peter. Judas, two High Priests, Pontius Pilate, Pilate's wife, two false witnesses, and two maids are also named parts. These "character" parts are all either recitatives or arias, sometimes in duet or sometimes accompanied by orchestration. The false witnesses come from Choir 2 while all the rest of the character soloists come from Choir 1.²¹ Bach needed two choirs for his sound drama. The crowds occasionally have a dialogue, much like what you heard yesterday in the discussion between the Daughters of Zion and the Faithful. You'll hear the choirs again today as the priests discuss when and how they'll entrap Jesus and when the disciples protest the "wasted" perfume. The accompanied recitative reflecting on this part of the story comes from the woman with the perfume. She equates the ointment with her tears and Bach uses the adjoining flute to fill our ears with the sound of dropping water.²² Listen for that with your children!

Bach uses accompanied recitatives for some of the character parts as well as in reflective pieces. One of the most poignant *accompagnato* recitatives is found in Jesus's solos. Bach has the entire string section of the first orchestra (remember he wrote this for a double orchestra!) using longer notes to highlight the *Vox Christi* or "words of Christ." This has lovingly been referred to as "Jesus's halo." The only time the halo is absent throughout the oratorio is when Jesus utters his final words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"²³ The halo will appear with someone

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else, and it is fun to let your children know that here at the beginning so they can start critically thinking through who might receive the halo strings later on. Compositional choices like this bring the libretto to life through the music and demonstrate why this particular oratorio is considered the greatest of the Baroque Era by many scholars.

The Great Passion

Scripture Reading

Matthew 26:1-13

Listening

Gardiner's recording: Track 2 (:36); Track 3 (:38); Track 4 (2:52); Track 5 (:52); Track 6 (4:14)

Libretto

Track 2 (:36)

No. 2 Recitative (Evangelist and Jesus)

(BWV No. 2)

Evangelist

Da Jesus diese Rede volendet
hatte, sprach er zu seinen
Jüngern:

When Jesus had finished all
these teachings, he said to his
disciples:

Jesus

Ihr wisest, dass nach zweien
Tagen Ostern wird, und des
Menschen Sohn wird über-
antwortet werden, dass er
gekreuziget werde.

You know, it's going to be
the Passover and the Son of
Man will be turned in to be
crucified.

Track 3 (:38)

No. 3 Chorale

(BWV No. 3)

Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du
verbrochen,
Dass man ein solch scharf
Urteil hat gesprochen?
Was ist die Schuld, in was für
Missetaten
Bist du geraten?

Beloved Jesus, what have you
done wrong,
That they have given you such
a harsh sentence?
What are you guilty of, what
sorts of bad behavior
have you fallen into?

Track 4 (2:52)

**No. 4a-4e Recitative (Evangelist, Chorus, and
Jesus)**

(BWV Nos. 4-8)

Evangelist

Da versammelten sich die
Hohepriester und Schriftge-
lehrten und die Ältesten im
Volk in dem Palast des Hohe-
priesters, der da hieß Kaiphas,
und hielten Rat, wie sie Jesum
mit Listen griffen und töteten.
Sie sprachen aber:

The high priests and scribes
got together alongside the el-
ders of the people in the High
Priest Caiphas's palace. They
discussed how they might
secretly accomplish Jesus's
capture and execution. But
they said:

Chorus

Ja nicht auf das Fest, auf dass
nicht ein Aufruhr werde im
Volk.

Not at the time of the cele-
brations in case it causes an
uproar among the people.

Evangelist

Da nun Jesus war zu
Bethanien, im Hause Simonis
des Aussätzigen,

When Jesus visited Bethany in
the house of the leper Simon,