The Role of the St. Matthew Passion in the 19th Century Revival of Bach's Music

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Abstract. The St. Matthew Passion (BWV 244) is one of J. S. Bach's most iconic religious works, and although it was not widely recognised during Bach's lifetime, it became an important symbol of the revival of Bach's music in the nineteenth century, especially driven by Felix Mendelssohn's revivals. The aim of this paper is to explore the Bach musical revival in the 19th century based on the composition St. Matthew Passion. By analysing the historical background of the work, its musical characteristics, and the cultural and social impact of its revival, the paper illustrates how the Matthew Passion acquired new emotional and religious significance in Mendelssohn's revival and contributed to the revival of Bach's music. This article shows that the revival not only laid the foundation for the reappraisal and dissemination of Bach's works in later generations, but also highlighted its importance within the development of the musical trends of romanticism and nationalism.

Keywords: J. S. Bach, St. Matthew Passion, musical revival, romanticism, religious music.

1 Introduction

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) was one of the most iconic composers of the Baroque period, and although his religious work St. Matthew Passion is now renowned, it failed to fit in with the aesthetics of the time during Bach's lifetime, and was even considered outdated for a time. It was not until the early 19th century that the German composer Mendelssohn revived the St. Matthew Passion, fuelling a renaissance of Bach's music and bringing it back to prominence as a key work in musical performance. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the background to the composition of the St. Matthew Passion and the reasons for its early lack of recognition, to explore how its own artistic characteristics provided the basis for the possibility of a later revival, and to further examine the far-reaching impact of the revival of the St. Matthew Passion in 19th century culture and society.

In recent years, foreign scholars have made remarkable research results on the revival of Bach's music, especially focusing on the cultural, religious and historical background of the revival of the St. Matthew Passion. Berger, Karol et al. have pointed out

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that Mendelssohn's revival of the St. Matthew Passion embodied the background of the cultural revival of 19th century Romanticism and German nationalism, which prompted Bach's music to become an important symbol of German national identity [1]. Theology, Music, and Modernity emphasises the work's transcendence of the religious ritual itself, reflecting a societal reconceptualisation of religious sentiments and artistic values at the time [2]. David Liakos uses the concept of "fusion of horizons" to illustrate how the St. Matthew Passion has become a medium for modern audiences to reconceptualise Christian sentiment across historical divides [3].

Cong Chang emphasises the work's place in the cultural revival of Romanticism and nationalism in 19th century Germany, pointing out that the revival was not only a revaluation of artistic values, but also a reconstruction of German national cultural identity [4]. Zhang Qiqi, on the other hand, believes that the revival of St. Matthew Passion strengthens German religious sentiment and national cultural self-consciousness [5]. Bi Kun points out that in the post-Christian era, *St. Matthew Passion* acquires renewed significance through aesthetic reception, as its meaning is no longer anchored in doctrinal belief but in the listener's subjective experience [6]. However, existing studies are still not systematic enough to analyse the cultural and social impact of the revival, especially the relationship between the religious sentiment of the work and 19th century romanticism and nationalism, which needs to be further explored.

This paper adopts the literature method to analyse relevant academic materials and clarify the historical background and cultural symbolism of St. Matthew Passion. In addition, it uses the work analysis method to meticulously analyse the structure of the work's chorus, congregational hymns, arias and scripts, to reveal the relationship between the musical form and the expression of religious emotion, and to further explore the cultural value of the work in the nineteenth-century revival.

2 Historical Background and the Composition of the St. Matthew Passion

2.1 Historical Background

The St. Matthew Passion, composed in 1727, is one of Bach's most representative religious works. Bach's musical works are known for their exquisite counterpoint and complex harmonic structures. His compositional style was heavily influenced by the music theories of the Baroque period and was particularly unique in its harmony and counterpoint [7]. He created complex and harmonious acoustics by interweaving different voices and melodies through precise musical structures. In his religious works, Bach not only demonstrated a superb mastery of musical technique, but also expressed profound religious emotions through music, especially in the St. Matthew Passion, where the story of Jesus' crucifixion is presented in the form of music, demonstrating the perfect combination of religious themes and musical emotions.

The background of this work is closely related to the religious atmosphere of Germany at that time and Bach's own religious beliefs. The theme of the work is taken from the story of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament,

and Bach portrays the Last Supper, the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus using intricate counterpoint and rich harmonic frameworks [8].

2.2 The Unaccepted Composition

Although the St. Matthew Passion demonstrates Bach's superior musical skills and profound emotional expression, it did not gain wide recognition during Bach's lifetime [9]. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to analyse it from the aspects of musical style, historical background and religious culture.

Firstly, Bach's musical style was not in line with the trend of the time: in the late 18th century Baroque, European music tended to be more dramatic and emotionally expressive, and under the influence of the Enlightenment, religious and polyphonic structures were simplified, and monophonic melodies and clear harmonies became the mainstay. Bach's St. Matthew Passion is known for its complex counterpoint and polyphonic structure, a style that was difficult for listeners accustomed to simple melodies and harmonies to accept.

Secondly, the qualities of Bach's religious music did not fit perfectly with the social and cultural background of the time. Although the St. Matthew Passion profoundly depicts the crucifixion of Jesus and the repentance of mankind, its strong religious theme was out of touch with the religious atmosphere of the 18th century, especially in Germany, where Enlightenment ideas were prevalent and religious music was gradually replaced by secular music. Although Bach's work was of great artistic value, many listeners at the time failed to empathise with it and found it too heavy.

In addition, Bach's music lacked sufficient promotion. Known more as a church musician during his lifetime, Bach's religious works were mostly performed in local churches and did not have the same impact on the wider musical community as Haydn and Mozart, lacking the audience base of popular composers, thus limiting the dissemination of his works. It was not until Mendelssohn's revival in the early 19th century that the St. Matthew Passion regained widespread attention.

2.3 Musical Highlights in St. Matthew Passion

The lyrics of " St. Matthew Passion " are taken from the 26th and 27th chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, and the whole work is divided into two main parts with a total of 78 stanzas. The first part tells of Jesus' betrayal and condemnation by his disciples, while the second part describes Jesus' journey to the cross and his death and burial. The entire work consists of choruses, congregational hymns, arias and declamatory tunes. The chorus consists of the first choir representing the twelve disciples of Jesus and the second choir representing the multitude, in addition to a children's choir, which enriches the choral layering. For the orchestra, Bach used two groups of orchestras to complement the music in bringing to life the biblical story of Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection.

The St. Matthew Passion consists of an exquisite Overture and an opening chorus. The Overture sets the stage for the entire work through the interweaving of motifs and

themes, demonstrating Bach's profound mastery of musical structure and emotional expression. Bach skillfully fuses the two themes to form an organic whole rather than a simple two-part structure, which demonstrates his deep understanding of polyphonic techniques.

The opening chorus, "Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen", in combination with the libretto and the score, sets the emotional tone of mourning throughout the work (see Figure 1), and Marissen points out that Bach's use of strong harmonic contrasts and rhythmic variations in this chorus reflects the religious emotion of mourning [10] . Specifically, the minor key tonality and triple meter rhythm create a grave and mournful atmosphere, while the frequent occurrence of diminished seventh chords harmonically strengthens the emotional tension, showing the believer's inner struggle and grief. At the same time, the strings and woodwinds subtly cooperate with each other to enrich the acoustic level of the chorus and enhance the effect of emotional expression.

After the chorus, the music shifts to a more internalised expression of emotion, as exemplified by the tenor's performance of the 26th part, "Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen".
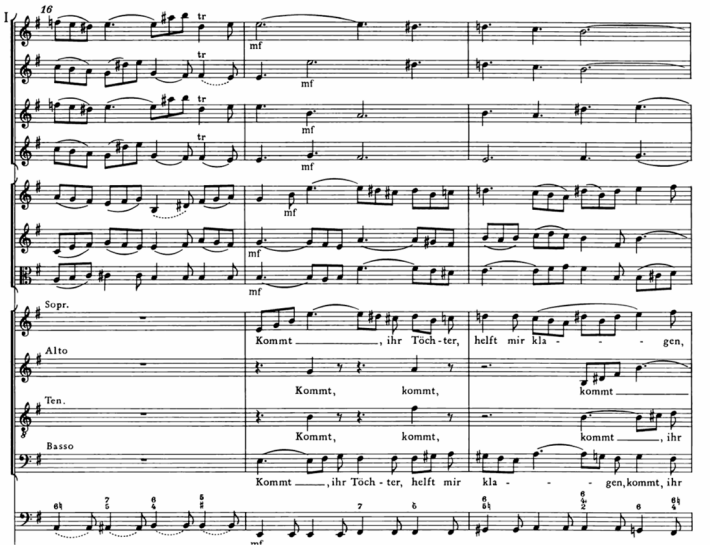
Fig. 1. The interplay of motif and theme [11].
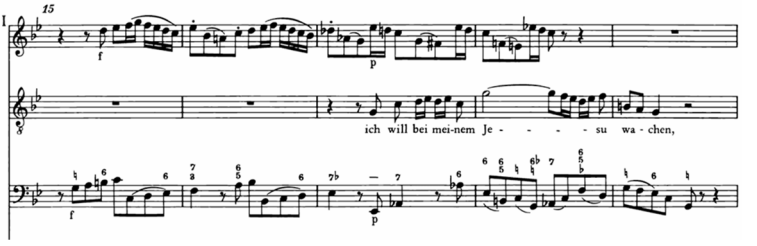
Fig. 2. The melodic and harmonic structures [11].

As can be seen from the score, Bach adopts a relatively simple melodic and harmonic structure in this section, with the melody mainly based on gradations and gentle skips, and the rhythm is stable and regular, avoiding complex rhythmic conflicts and dramatic emotional ups and downs (see Figure 2). In contrast to the frequent use of large intervals, unstable chords (e.g. diminished seventh chords) and intense grief in the previous chorus, it highlights the change of emotion from group grief to personal inner peace and watchfulness. The harmonic design is based on basic chords and their inversions, the chord progression is clear and simple, and the harmonic rhythm is calm and orderly, reflecting the inner peace and pious guardianship of the believers. This shift from complex and strong emotions to simple and introverted expression clearly demonstrates the variety and delicacy of Bach's emotional expression, and successfully realises the progression and transformation of the overall mood of the music.

As the music develops, Bach shifts his emotions from a steadfast vigilance to a deeper plea for forgiveness. In the 47th cent "Erbarme dich, mein Gott" the music expresses intense anguish and penitence.
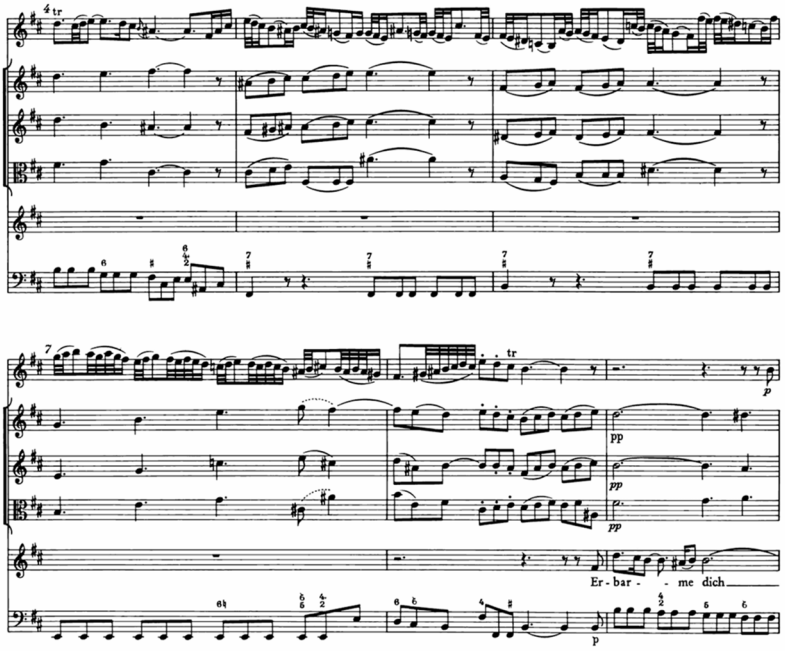
Fig. 3. Long-Breathed Melodic Lines and Sustained Rhythmic Foundation [11].

As can be seen from the score, this piece is labelled "pp" (very soft), and the string section is laid out in long, slow, sustained rhythmic patterns, creating a soft and melancholic soundscape. The soprano's melodic line uses chromatic progressions and meandering melodic directions, reflecting an inner struggle and state of doubt (see figure 3). Rhythmically, the combination of eighth notes and sixteenth notes creates a slow and extended musical narrative. At the same time, the recurrence of the lyric "Erbarme dich"

(Have Mercy on Me) in the melody, combined with the use of diminished seventh chords, significantly increases the harmonic tension and instability, thus concretely depicting Peter's agony in the face of his inner guilt and his eagerness to seek forgiveness.
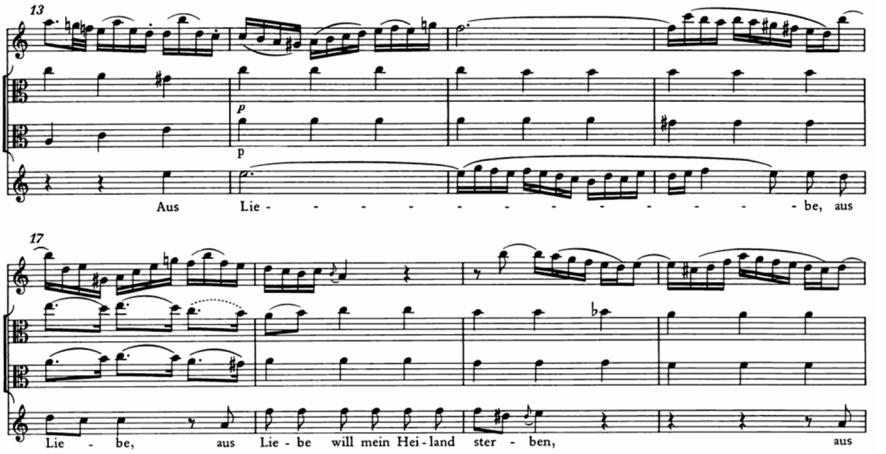
Fig. 4. The contrapuntal dialogue between long-lined soprano and flute voices.

This is followed by the 58th Canto, the most famous aria from the St. Matthew Passion, the soprano-dominated "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben", which is situated in the scene of the second part, "Interrogation of Jesus", and is the climax of the second part. It is also the climax of the second part, the "Interrogation of Jesus" scene.

Zhao Wei pointed out that in the 58th Canto "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben" (My Saviour Died for Love), Bach used a two-part structure of minor tonality and recapitulation in order to express the religious theme and emotional connotations of the aria [12]. As can be seen in the score, the soprano melody forms a counterpoint to the transverse flute part with longer notes, clearly reflecting the interweaving of the two melodic lines (see Figure 4). This design gives the melody an obvious contrast and interplay, highlighting the inner meaning of the theme of the work "Sacrifice for Love". The strings in the backing section support the singing voice with simple repetitive patterns, forming a stable rhythmic background. Harmonically, the alternation of diminished seventh and triadic chords reflects the tension and relaxation of the music, and clearly expresses the inner conflict of "sacrifice" and the deep religious meaning of the work.

Combined with the score, it is clear to see how Bach's polyphony and complex harmonic structure demonstrates a deep understanding of religion and music, but this complexity was at odds with popular music styles of the time, limiting the work's reception. With subsequent interpretations and scholarly reawakening, Bach's musical legacy, particularly the St. Matthew Passion, has come to be regarded as a high point in the history of Western music.

3 St. Matthew Passion and the Bach's Revival

3.1 Mendelssohn's Attempt

Mendelssohn's successful revival of Bach's St. Matthew Passion in Berlin, Germany, in 1829, was a landmark event in the revival of Bach's music and a turning point in the history of 19th century music [13]. Preparations for the revival began with Mendelssohn's deep musical background with his mother, Sara Levy, whose ties to the Bach family gave Mendelssohn access to Bach's rare manuscripts, providing a practical basis for the revival. Mendelssohn's revival is more than just an interpretation of Bach's works; it is also a reflection of his deep understanding of Bach's music, with some modest adjustments made to the performance to better suit the needs of the time.

In arranging the performances, Mendelssohn took into account the cultural atmosphere of the concerts at the time. The venue chosen for the revival was the Sing-Akademie in Berlin, a venue with historical roots in Bach's works. During the performance, Mendelssohn not only reproduced Bach's harmonic and counterpoint techniques, but also made some necessary adaptations to the programme. For example, Mendelssohn adjusted the configuration of the orchestra to include more strings and woodwinds, resulting in a richer and more lively interpretation of the work [14]. The choral parts were also meticulously rehearsed, and Mendelssohn ensured that each vocal part was performed with clarity and vigour through precise conducting techniques and vocal demands.

The premiere of the revival took place on 11 March 1829, with Mendelssohn himself conducting and an orchestra consisting of leading Berlin musicians. The performance not only attracted a large audience, but also gave many music critics an insight into the work. Mendelssohn's revival brought the St. Matthew Passion back into the public eye and set the stage for the widespread dissemination of Bach's work. After the performance, Bach's music began to gradually gain respect and became an important part of the revival of Romantic music.

3.2 Impact of the Revival of the St. Matthew Passion

Mendelssohn's revival of the St. Matthew Passion is a musical recreation of Bach's work and also represents a key moment in the social and cultural renaissance of 19th century Germany. With the rise of Romanticism, there was a gradual shift in musical style towards emotional expression, which led to a different understanding of Bach's works in a new cultural context. Originally composed for a religious service, the St. Matthew Passion, with its complex polyphonic structure and deep religious emotion, was given a new meaning in the Romantic trend of the 19th century. Revivals made the work no longer limited to the church, but became an important cultural vehicle for the expression of personal emotions, historical memories, and social reflections.

Romanticism in 19th-century Germany emphasised individual emotional experience, especially the deepening of religious emotion. Mendelssohn's revival revitalised the musical language and religious themes in the St. Matthew Passion. Through delicate polyphonic techniques, Bach presented the agony of the crucifixion and the hope of

salvation, themes that emerged alongside the renewed exploration of religion and emotion in German society [15]. Therefore, the revival of St. Matthew Passion not only responded to the need for emotional expression in the Romantic era, but also had a far-reaching influence on the music composition and performance style of the time.

The impact of the revival of the St. Matthew Passion went far beyond its role in religious services, and it became a symbol of the cultural renaissance of 19th-century Germany. As nationalist sentiment rose, Mendelssohn brought the work from the church to the concert hall, giving it a new cultural significance. This transformation reflected not only the revival of German culture, but also the reconstruction of national identity. Bach's work regained widespread social recognition through revivals and became an important symbol of German cultural confidence.

Mendelssohn's revival made the St. Matthew Passion a central work of German cultural identity. It not only demonstrated the depth of Bach's music, but also, through revivals, enabled German society to revisit its musical traditions and cultural heritage. This process of revival marked a reappraisal of Bach's works in the nineteenth century and contributed to the further development of Germany's musical and cultural self-confidence.

3.3 Reevaluation of Bach's Works after the Revival of the St. Matthew Passion

The revival of the St. Matthew Passion ushered in a turning point in the re-evaluation of Bach's works and marked the culmination of a revival of Bach's music. Driven by the nationalist and romantic ideas of 19th-century Germany, Bach's works went from being neglected to regaining respect, and the St. Matthew Passion in particular was given a whole new artistic and religious significance. The Mendelssohn revival not only restored the artistic value of the St. Matthew Passion, but also made it a central symbol in the cultural revival of Romanticism and the nationalist movement.

After the revival, the St. Matthew Passion quickly gained widespread performances in Germany and other parts of Europe, and the global recognition and esteem of Bach's work gradually expanded. The St. Matthew Passion was no longer confined to religious occasions, but rather was given more attention and favour in concert performances. This shift not only elevated Bach's status in music history, but also made the St. Matthew Passion an important symbol of social and cultural change in the 19th century. Through Mendelssohn's revivals, the St. Matthew Passion entered a wider cultural context and became an important part of the artistic and social renaissance, which promoted the dissemination of Bach's music among different social classes and cultural backgrounds.

In addition, the revival of the St. Matthew Passion has had a profound impact on the tradition of music education and music performance in Germany. With the revival of the St. Matthew Passion, the teaching and performance of Bach's works not only gradually became part of the music education system, but also occupied an important position in all kinds of concerts, academic discussions and music research. This laid the foundation for the subsequent dissemination and study of Bach's works, especially the in-depth exploration of his complex musical technique, emotional expression and its

cultural function in the Romantic period, which prompted scholars to constantly examine Bach's artistic value.

Globally, the revival of the St. Matthew Passion has contributed to the reappraisal of Bach's work. Through cross-cultural renditions and interpretations, the revival cemented Bach's important place in music history and made the St. Matthew Passion one of the representatives of religious music of the Romantic period. This revival not only changed the positioning of Bach's work in German culture, but also had a profound impact on the musical cultures of other countries and regions, thus gradually making Bach's music a central part of the global musical heritage. With the revival of the St. Matthew Passion, Bach's works were widely disseminated and reappraised around the world, propelling Bach to become a monumental symbol of the world's cultural heritage.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the St. Matthew Passion has a crucial position in Bach's revival period. Through musical analysis, it can be seen that Bach's complex counterpoint and harmonic techniques succeeded in conveying religious sentiments, especially in the emotional progression and structural arrangement of the work, which demonstrated profound religious themes. The work regained artistic and cultural recognition with Mendelssohn's revival and became a symbol of religious and cultural revival in the 19th century. The revival not only gave the St. Matthew Passion new religious and emotional significance, but also contributed to the global dissemination and re-evaluation of Bach's music. It became an important force in the artistic renaissance in the context of Romanticism and German nationalism, further consolidating the centrality of Bach's works in music history.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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