



BERLIN STATE LIBRARY

Reclaiming the past

Malcolm Bruno explains how a birthday present to a teenage boy led to a revival of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* and outlines the pragmatic revisions that facilitated its performance in a new musical era

It was nearly 74 years from the death of J.S. Bach in July 1750 to Felix Mendelssohn's 15th birthday. On 3 February 1824 the precocious young composer opened a most prized gift – a bespoke copy of the *Matthäus-Passion*. And as he was to tell his brother Paul years later in Leipzig, 'not a single note of it was known.'

It is today inconceivable to imagine our musical heritage devoid of Bach's music; yet in the early 19th century Bach's works had survived largely as the silent artefacts of a vanished grandeur. His music was seen as little more than exercises in rigorous counterpoint, a successor to the *Gradus ad parnassum* of J.J. Fux. Such Bachian study had, however, stirred the contrapuntal imagination of the youthful Mendelssohn. With the Magnificat settings of J.S. and C.P.E. Bach to hand, and under the watchful eye of his teacher and mentor Carl Friedrich Zelter, he had in 1822 already produced his own 'neo-baroque' Magnificat, complete with a dazzling seven-part fugal finale. By 1828 – in the trail of other outstanding youthful work (including the Octet in 1825 and the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1826) – he was focusing all his ambition in a revival of the *Matthäus-Passion* to mark the centenary of its premiere in 1729.

More challenging an undertaking than initially envisaged, Mendelssohn's Bach debut took place in Berlin on 11 March 1829. Mustering the vast forces of the Sing-Akademie in its own non-ecclesiastical setting, the *Matthäus-Passion* had been removed from the preserve of Bach's elite, skilled musicians of the Thomaskirche into the new arena of the amateur choral society. With 158 singers and an orchestra – also not all professional – of some 70 performers, the undertaking gave the ambitious 20-year-old Mendelssohn pause for thought: the hefty technical demands of Bach's music couched in the

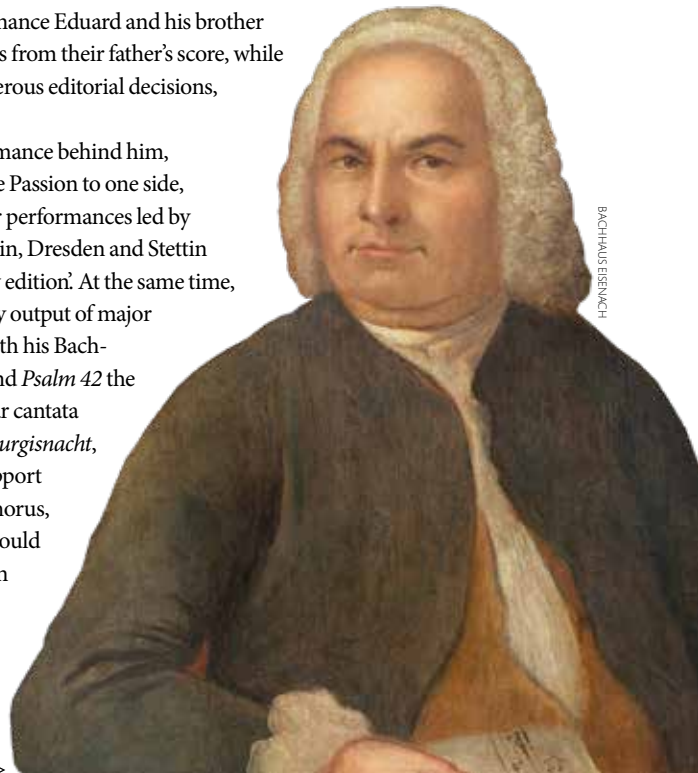
no-longer familiar idiom of the high baroque yielded far less from the Berlin 'dilettanten' than Mendelssohn could conceive as he contemplated his score.

As much of Bach's music had yet to be published, Mendelssohn worked from the 'birthday' copy commissioned by his grandmother in 1824. Created ultimately from a set of parts from the Thomaskirche (previously used by Bach), it had been copied out by Johann Ritz, father of the violinist Eduard Rietz, Mendelssohn's violin teacher and colleague who would lead the 1829 performance, with Mendelssohn at the keyboard. For the performance Eduard and his brother Julius had copied out parts from their father's score, while Mendelssohn made numerous editorial decisions, including significant cuts.

With the Berlin performance behind him, Mendelssohn then put the *Passion* to one side, though there were further performances led by Zelter in the 1830s in Berlin, Dresden and Stettin using Mendelssohn's 'new edition'. At the same time, Mendelssohn's own steady output of major choral work continued with his Bach-inspired *Paulus* in 1836 and *Psalm 42* the following year. The secular cantata from 1832, *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*, with its evangelist-like rapport between tenor solo and chorus, also anticipated how he would return to the *Passion* again within a few years.

Meanwhile in 1835, following his appointment as music director of the Gewandhaus orchestra ▶

▶ Felix Mendelssohn (top), whose passion for the music of J.S. Bach (below) led to a performance of the latter's *Matthäus-Passion* a hundred years after its first performance



BACHHAUS BERLIN

MENDELSSOHN AND THE MATTHÄUS-PASSION



▲ Front cover of the first printed edition of J.S. Bach's *Matthäus-Passion*, published a year after the 1829 revival of the work

◁ in Leipzig, Mendelssohn's dedication to Bach's music became evermore visible with his programming of movements of the then unknown B minor Mass and the third orchestral suite. By 1840 his musical activity in Leipzig also focused on the Thomaskirche and a proposed monument to Bach. He gave organ recitals of Bach's music there, dedicated to funding the project along with the premiere of the *Lobgesang (Hymn of Praise)* in June 1840 and the revival of the *Grosse Passions-Musik* for Palm Sunday 1841.

As he turned to the Passion again in early 1841, Mendelssohn once again addressed performance issues with particular attention to the following:

- ▶ overall cuts and structure of the work
- ▶ trimming and re-styling of the *secco* recitative
- ▶ use of the Grand Organ at the Thomaskirche
- ▶ replacement of obsolete instruments

Considering his cuts from 1829 too severe, though still wishing for some pruning, he limited the slimming-down process to only five chorales and six arias (mostly with their associated recits):

- ▶ 'Ich will dir mein Herze schenken'
- ▶ 'Gerne will ich mich bequemen'
- ▶ 'Geduld, wenn mich falsche Zungen stechen'
- ▶ 'Können Tränen meiner Wangen'
- ▶ 'Komm, süßes Kreuz'
- ▶ 'Sehet, Jesus hat die Hand'

Both 'Geduld' and 'Komm, süßes Kreuz,' with their virtuosic soli conceived specifically for the (by then extinct) viola da gamba, were obvious choices for removal. Other arias like 'Können Tränen' – interrupting the narrative at one of the most dramatic moments – also became candidates for advantageous deletion. Mendelssohn meanwhile continued with an earlier system of renumbering, grouping movements into broad sections, being 'bothered terribly,' as he had earlier noted about *Paulus*, 'by overlong pauses between individual numbers'. The 78 movements of the first published *Matthäus-Passion* edition from 1830 (there are currently 68 in the current *Neue Bach-Ausgabe (NBA)*) he thereby reduced to 35!

This 'compacting process' was largely achieved by trimming the *secco* recit and remodelling it as if it were through-composed with its neighbouring *turba* chorus and *accompagnato* sections. After the opening choral-aria of Part 2, for example, a long sequence – now without 'Geduld' but with his abbreviated recit alongside the short *turba* interjections – became a single, swift movement (incorporating NBA numbers 31–38) up to 'Erbarme dich'. In so doing it thrust a spotlight on Peter's three-fold denial, thus increasing the pathos of 'Erbarme dich' – itself already enhanced by his assigning the aria to the soprano voice. The tension was further heightened by a transposition of the solo violin up an octave under the first appearance of the word 'Zähren' (tears) at bar 21.

Mendelssohn was also sensitive to the general rise in orchestral pitch, which even by 1829 was near A=440Hz in both Berlin and Leipzig. For the tenor Evangelist, all the high tessitura passages would thus effectively be rendered a semitone higher from Bach's original intention (the pitch standard in Leipzig during his time being c.A=415Hz). Mendelssohn accordingly combed the Evangelist's part assiduously, rewriting the phrases peaking above g1 (except notably the high B flat for the 'veil of the temple torn in twain'). Such revision of this *secco* recit also allowed him the opportunity to make further adjustments to achieve a more 'low-profile' style of recit, consciously relieving the melodic line of Bach's more florid intensity.

Mendelssohn's penchant for plainness in the *secco* recit also extended to the keyboard – his 1829 performance had been both simple harmonically and with minimal right-hand embellishment. In revisiting the *secco* recit for 1841 (and with the non-existence of a piano in the Thomaskirche), he recast all the *secco* recit orchestrally

MENDELSSOHN AND THE MATTHÄUS-PASSION

in similar style to his own recit in *Paulus* – reworking keyboard triads into chordal harmony for two solo cellos and a double bass, with the full complement of strings then joining for the *accompagnato* sections.

Performance in the Thomaskirche also gave the opportunity to include the organ. Though Mendelssohn might well have employed the organ in a more ‘Mahlerian’ style, undergirding full choir at climactic moments as he had in *Paulus* and the *Lobgesang*, the old instrument at the Thomaskirche (still in use in the mid-19th century) posed insoluble difficulties: apparently tuned in an early baroque Chorton of unequal temperament at c.A=490Hz, any part for it had to be transposed a whole tone lower, to accommodate the A=440Hz of the Gewandhaus orchestra. But the transposition of its unequal temperament clearly made it virtually unusable for Bach’s highly chromatic writing. Deleted bars in the organ part for the dramatic ‘veil of the temple torn in twain’ (‘und siehe da, der Vorhang im Tempel zerriß in zwei Stück’) show precisely the tuning nightmare that

Deleted bars in the organ part for ‘the veil of the temple torn in twain’ show the tuning nightmare Mendelssohn faced

Mendelssohn must have faced in performance. The organ part as we now have it is also frustratingly incomplete, though its *colla parte* doubling of the choir in the chorales survives along with the middle section of ‘Blute nur’ and intermittent bars of ‘Buß und reu’ in which a beautiful cameo accompaniment appears unexpectedly (as if of a distant second orchestra *con sordini*). Equally revealing is the organ part’s opening six bars indicating a low pedal E only, marked 32ft, again prefiguring what a late romantic composer might have proposed a half century later.

In all, unlike Mozart’s 1789 ‘additional accompaniments’ for *Messiah* or Schumann’s orchestral reworking of the *Johannes-Passion* in 1851, Mendelssohn’s approach to Bach’s *Matthäus-Passion* was by comparison abstemious. Only the substitution of clarinets for larger members of the baroque oboe family and the reslurring for the string parts now appear as its main orchestrational contribution, though what more he might have done with the organ remains an open question.

After 1841 Mendelssohn’s ‘edition’ remained in Leipzig with his friend and colleague Julius Rietz for what were to become the annual *Matthäus-Passion* performances of the Gewandhaus orchestra. By 1850 publication of Breitkopf’s Bach-Gesellschaft project had begun with

Rietz himself providing the new Gesellschaft edition of the *Matthäus-Passion* in 1854. The new volume, however, essentially a library and scholarly work, was complemented by the publisher with a new performing edition by organist, baroque scholar and composer Robert Franz. Moving beyond a literal transcription of Bach’s original score, Franz followed Mendelssohn’s

▼ The recitative ‘Und siehe da, der Vorhang im Tempel’: (top) Bach’s original for Evangelist and organ with bowed bass (from the *Neue Bach Ausgabe*), and (below) Mendelssohn’s dramatic realisation of the same for full string orchestra

63a. Evangelista
 Tenore Evangelista
 Continuo Organo
 Und sie-he da, der Vor-hang im Tem-pel zer-riß in zwei Stück
 von o-ben-an bis un-ten-aus. Und die Er-de er-be-te, und die Fel-sen zer-ris-sen, und die

37. Evangelium
 Evangelista
 I/II a tempo
 Und sie-he da, der Vor-hang im Tem-pel zer-ris-sen in zwei Stück
 von o-ben-an bis un-ten-aus. Und die Er-de er-be-te, und die Fel-sen zer-ris-sen, und die

Recitativo
 Ev. von o-ben-an bis un-ten-aus. Und die Er-de er-be-te, und die Fel-sen zer-ris-sen, und die

Violino I
 Violino II
 Viola
 Violoncello e Con trabasso

MENDELSSOHN AND THE MATTHÄUS-PASSION

SARIPPLAKAU/PIAS



▲ The world's oldest memorial to J.S. Bach was initiated by Mendelssohn in 1843 and stands on the Ditttrichring in Leipzig (watercolour by Eduard Holzstich, 1850)

◀ instincts in addressing the performance needs of a 19th-century symphony orchestra. Mendelssohn's score and parts, meanwhile, had by 1853 been copied for (or loaned to) his protégé William Sterndale Bennett (1816-75) for the first London performances of the Passion in 1854 and 1858, after which Bennett published the first complete *St Matthew Passion* in English. It appeared in 1862 in vocal score only, with a revised version in 1871. Bennett's full conducting score, however, (printed in Berlin in 1830) remained unaltered with his own adaptation of Mendelssohn's shortened 'edition'.

What happened to the Mendelssohn score and parts after Bennett's death remains so far a moot point. Mendelssohn's brother Paul (1812-74) had been caretaker of many of Mendelssohn's manuscripts as had also been Cécile, Mendelssohn's widow. Shortly after her death in 1854, their daughter Marie (1839-97) moved to London on her marriage to Victor Benecke; and it

was through their son Paul Mendelssohn Benecke, Mendelssohn's grandson (1868-1944), that the score and parts eventually made their way to the Bodleian Library, where they are to be found today. As there is no mention of Mendelssohn's score and parts or of his 'version' after Bennett, it would seem not unreasonable to suppose that either Bennett or his heirs or associates may have given such material as they had to Marie or to Paul Benecke before or after Bennett's death. From this point onward 'Mendelssohn's *Matthäus-Passion*' had effectively disappeared, superseded by Franz and subsequently (in England) with an edition by Henry Wood, only to re-emerge at the Bodleian again in the mid 20th century.

It is now increasingly rare for us to revisit music of the past without any consideration of its context: its original purpose and parameters, including the peculiarities of its instrumentation and rhetorical style. But for composers before the present era, embracing earlier repertoire – whether Mendelssohn's revival of Bach or Mozart's updating of Handel – was a practical matter of one composer customising the forgotten style of a predecessor to fit his own musical domain. Mendelssohn's 1841 performance of the *Grosse Passions-Musik* has all the hallmarks of such accommodation and of a work 'still-in-progress'. As thus left to us it is not definitive, but a significant milestone in Mendelssohn's musical journey – a journey with Bach as companion – ending prematurely. Had he lived only a few years longer and with the growing interest in Bach he had brought about, he would certainly, we may well imagine, have settled on a more final version of the Passion, perhaps even for publication.

Over the past half-century we have refashioned 18th-century performance in ways previously deemed unattainable. More recently, we have entered the early romantic world of Mendelssohn's orchestra. It is there that we meet 'Mendelssohn's' *Matthäus-Passion*. As the cumulative detail of it comes into focus, we see afresh through his eyes – in the slurring of violins, the substitution of the clarinets or basset horns, in the trimming of recit or the tightening of dramatic arias – a discovery of our common musical forebear. One musical genius points to another, to a new way to the master we thought we knew so exhaustively. ■

Mendelssohn's realisation of Bach's Grosse Passions-Musik nach dem Evangelisten Matthäus (St Matthew Passion), edited by Malcolm Bruno and Caroline Ritchie, will be published by Bärenreiter Verlag in September 2023.

Recently visiting scholar at Princeton, musicologist Malcolm Bruno is editor of a number of major choral publications for Breitkopf & Härtel and Bärenreiter Verlag. An independent producer for BBC and Public Radio International in the US, he is artistic director of Larvik Barokk in Norway, where he also chairs the board of the ensemble Barokksolistene.