

LIBRETTO

Passion according to St. Matthew (1777), H 790

1. Chorale

O innocent lamb of God
slaughtered on the stem of the cross,
ever found patient,
although you were despised.
You have borne all sin,
otherwise must we have despaired.
Have mercy on us, o Jesus!

2. Chorus

Examine me, sound out my heart
and see, Lord, my intentions!
I think of the pain of your suffering,
of your love, and I weep.
May your cross be blessed to me!
What a miracle of mercy
have you shown the world!
When have I adequately considered this
and with all my might
praised you enough for it?

3. Recitative

EVANGELIST. Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place
called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples,
JESUS. Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder.
EVANGELIST. And he took with him Peter and the two
sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy.
Then saith he unto them,
JESUS. My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death:
tarry ye here, and watch with me.
EVANGELIST. And he went a little further, and fell on his
face, and prayed, saying,
JESUS. O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from
me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.
EVANGELIST. And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth
them asleep, and saith unto Peter,

JESUS. What, could ye not watch with me one hour?
Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the
spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

4. Chorus

Awaken from the sleep of sin,
you self-assured world,
before God's wrath, the punishment of evil,
pronounces your sentence.
Awaken!
It shall soon come, the hour of vengeance!
Soon it shall roar forth like the ocean
with lethal terrors.

5. Recitative

EVANGELIST. He went away again the second time, and
prayed, saying,
JESUS. O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from
me, except I drink it, thy will be done.

6. Chorale

What my God wills, is always done.
What he wills is for the best.
He is ready to help
those who believe firmly in Him.
He saves us from affliction,
the holy God,
and chastises within measure.
The one who trusts in God,
relies firmly upon Him,
him will He not abandon.

7. Recitative

EVANGELIST. And he came and found them asleep again:
for their eyes were heavy. And he left them, and went away
again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.
Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them,

JESUS. Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.

EVANGELIST. And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying,

JUDAS. Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast.

EVANGELIST. And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said,

JUDAS. Hail, master;

EVANGELIST. and kissed him. And Jesus said unto him,

JESUS. Friend, wherefore art thou come?

EVANGELIST. Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him. And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him,

JESUS. Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?

EVANGELIST. In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes,

JESUS. Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me. But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.

8. Aria

O blessed eyes, that saw him!
O blessed, who heard from his mouth
the sweet word of the new covenant,
the beloved call of truth!

What blessedness to approach him in the flesh,
whom we can only glimpse in spirit,
him, who to make us happy forever
came from the throne of his heavens!

9. Recitative

EVANGELIST. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled.

10. Chorale

I want to stand here by you,
ah, do not despise me!
I do not wish to leave you,
when your heart is breaking.
When your head will grow pale
in the last pang of death,
then I will enfold you
in my arms and in my bosom.

11. Recitative

EVANGELIST. And they that had laid hold on Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end. Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death; but found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses, and said,

FALSE WITNESSES. This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days.

EVANGELIST. And the high priest arose, and said unto him,

HIGH PRIEST. Answerest thou nothing? what is it which these witness against thee?

EVANGELIST. But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him,

HIGH PRIEST. I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.

EVANGELIST. Jesus saith unto him,

JESUS. Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

EVANGELIST. Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying,

HIGH PRIEST. He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye?

12. Chorus

You dare it, you blasphemers, to tempt God?
The vengeance of the Almighty must curse you!
The clouds thunder ruin upon your head!
Swallow him up, o abyss, in roaring fury!
Crush him, shattering voice of the godhead,
The murderer, who steals honor from the Lord of
divinity!

13. Recitative

EVANGELIST. They answered and said,
CHORUS. He is guilty of death.

14. Chorale

Dearest Jesus, what sin have you committed,
that such a sharp judgment has been spoken?
What is the guilt, into what misdeeds
have you fallen?

15. Recitative

EVANGELIST. Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted
him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands,
saying,

CHORUS. Prophesy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that
smote thee?

EVANGELIST. Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a
damsel came unto him, saying,

FIRST WOMAN. Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee.

EVANGELIST. But he denied before them all, saying,

PETER. I know not what thou sayest.

EVANGELIST. And when he was gone out into the porch,
another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there,
SECOND WOMAN. This fellow was also with Jesus of Naza-
reth.

EVANGELIST. And again he denied with an oath,

PETER. I do not know the man.

EVANGELIST. And after a while came unto him they that
stood by, and said to Peter,

CHORUS. Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech
betrayeth thee.

EVANGELIST. Then began he to curse and to swear, say-
ing,

PETER. I know not the man.

EVANGELIST. And immediately the cock crew. And Peter
remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Be-
fore the cock crew, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went
out, and wept bitterly.

16a. Arioso

Ashamed, Peter flees your glance, Jesus.
Fear, but not the heart, denies you.
He looks back with deep remorse,
his tearful eye recognizes you.

16b. Aria

Here I too fall down before you in the dust;
my guilt too denies you.
Recognize me by my remorse,
know me by my tears!

17. Recitative

EVANGELIST. When the morning was come, all the chief
priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus
to put him to death. And when they had bound him, they
led him away, and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the gov-
ernor. Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw
that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought
again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and el-
ders, saying,

JUDAS. I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent
blood.

EVANGELIST. And they said,

CHORUS. What is that to us? see thou to that.

EVANGELIST. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the
temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

18. Chorale

Ah, but flee the devil's noose!
Sensuality can delight but a moment
and no longer.
For that, o Man, will you place your poor soul
as a forfeit in the hereafter
in the devil's pit?
Yes, fine exchange. Yes, quite risky,
which will be bemoaned among the devils.

19. Recitative

EVANGELIST. And the chief priests took the silver pieces,
and said,

HIGH PRIESTS. It is not lawful for to put them into the
treasury, because it is the price of blood.

EVANGELIST. And they took counsel, and bought with
them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore
that field was called, the field of blood, unto this day. Then
was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet,
saying, And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of
him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel
did value; and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord
appointed me. And Jesus stood before the governor: and
the governor asked him, saying,

PILATE. Art thou the King of the Jews?

EVANGELIST. And Jesus said unto him,
JESUS. Thou sayest.
EVANGELIST. And when he was accused of the chief
priests and elders, he answered nothing. Then said Pilate
unto him,
PILATE. Hearest thou not how many things they witness
against thee?
EVANGELIST. And he answered him to never a word; in-
somuch that the governor marvelled greatly.

20. Aria

O, but remain silent! Jesus too remained silent,
and his innocence achieved victory.
When no judge will listen,
wait for God and keep quiet!
Your conscience comforts you:
God comforts more strongly still!
Soon, pulled from your anguish,
you will overcome your distress.

21. Recitative

EVANGELIST. Now at that feast the governor was wont
to release unto the people a prisoner, whom they would.
And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas.
Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said
unto them,
PILATE. Whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas,
or Jesus which is called Christ?
EVANGELIST. For he knew that for envy they had deliv-
ered him. When he was set down on the judgment seat, his
wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with
that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a
dream because of him. But the chief priests and elders per-
suaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and
destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said unto them,
PILATE. Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto
you?
EVANGELIST. They said,
CHORUS. Barabbas.
EVANGELIST. Pilate saith unto them,
PILATE. What shall I do then with Jesus which is called
Christ?
EVANGELIST. They all say unto him,
CHORUS. Let him be crucified.
EVANGELIST. And the governor said,
PILATE. Why, what evil hath he done?

22. Chorale

But how wondrous is this punishment!
The good shepherd suffers for his sheep;
the debt is paid by the Lord, the righteous,
for his servants.

23. Recitative

EVANGELIST. But they cried out the more, saying,
CHORUS. Let him be crucified.
EVANGELIST. When Pilate saw that he could prevail
nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water,
and washed his hands before the multitude, saying,
PILATE. I am innocent of the blood of this just person:
see ye to it.
EVANGELIST. Then answered all the people, and said,
CHORUS. His blood be on us, and on our children.
EVANGELIST. Then released he Barabbas unto them: and
when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be cruci-
fied. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the
common hall, and gathered unto him the whole band of
soldiers. And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet
robe. And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they
put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they
bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying,
CHORUS. Hail, King of the Jews!
EVANGELIST. And they spit upon him, and took the
reed, and smote him on the head. And after that they had
mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his
own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him.

24. Aria

I tremble before you, God, and despair.
Your Christ is made into a curse,
and I, I have spent my days
in the service of sin.
Ah God, before your visage
I, a rebel, cannot persist
when your lethal verdicts
once terribly pass upon me!

25. Recitative

EVANGELIST. And as they came out, they found a man of
Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his
cross. And when they were come unto a place called Gol-
gotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, they gave him vinegar
to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof,
he would not drink. And they crucified him, and parted his

garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots. And sitting down they watched him there; and set up over his head his accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left. And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying,

CHORUS. Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.

EVANGELIST. Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said,

CHORUS. He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.

EVANGELIST. The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

26. Chorale

O great love, o love beyond all measure,
which brought you to this road of torments!
I lived with the world in pleasure and joys,
and you must suffer.

27. Recitative

EVANGELIST. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying,

JESUS. Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?

EVANGELIST. that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said,

CHORUS. This man calleth for Elias.

EVANGELIST. And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. The rest said,

CHORUS. Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him.

EVANGELIST. Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.

28. Accompanied Recitative

You high priest, Jesus Christ,
who for all who have sinned
through your own death
have entered into holiness
before God, reconciler;
who have heralded our eternal salvation,
have rendered us all secure!
You sacrifice of God, I stand too
on that blood-bedripped hill
where you bled and bore
the burden of the trespasses.
In faith I gaze upon you
and may, praise be to God!, and may dare to say,
to my comfort and your praise:
my Jesus died for me too!

29. Aria

Ah, when once my savior and my God
calls me to his joys:
How willingly shall I shed my garb
and consign my dust to the earth!
How joyfully shall I lift myself up to him,
to my Savior, my God!
You who dry my tears
and fulfill my dearest wish,
day of joy, day of the Lord,
if only, oh, if only you were not far off!

30. Chorale

I thank you from my heart,
o Jesus, dear friend,
for the pains of your death,
for you have meant them so well.
Ah, permit that I abide
in you and your faithfulness,
and when at last I shall grow cold,
let my end be in you.

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Translator's note:

To keep the focus on the original text, the choice was made to follow the German as literally as possible. I thank Ulrich Leisinger for his kind assistance. Biblical portions are from the King James Version.