

LIBRETTO

Passion according to St. Matthew (1773)

1. Chorale

O help us, Christ, God's son
through your bitter suffering,
that we might, always obedient to you,
avoid all vice;
and keep in mind most fruitfully
your death and its cause;
and for this, though we are poor and weak,
make offerings of thanks to you!

2. Chorus

Set down your harps, silent, you worldly choirs,
and observe the Passiontide of Jesus!
Shed for the Divine One the tenderest of tears
and make a sacrifice of righteousness to him!

3. Accompanied Recitative

Soon now will God strike the shepherd:
the Passover feast is near,
and Jesus walks to Golgotha,
to bear the burden of our guilt.
God draws the fury about him like a garment;
and in the most terrible darkness of night
thunders arise, and terrible judgments.
The hallelujah and its harmonies grow silent
and before the wrathful visage of the eternal
cherubs tremble and flee.
There the son walks, a curse, fully abandoned by
the father,
cast down to earth by sins which grip him mightily,
profaned by misdeeds,
and suffers in brotherliness for a world of sinners.

4. 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.

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.

5. Chorale

God is my comfort, my confidence,
my hope and my life.
What my God wishes, what befalls me,
I will not resist.
His word is true:
for he himself has counted
each hair of mine.
He protects and watches over,
always strives for us,
that we should lack nothing at all.

6. 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.

7. Accompanied Recitative

The enemies arm themselves,
my Savior, against you.
I see your innocent life
entirely surrounded by terrors of hell.
Debased and unholy mobs
already rejoice at approaching dangers;
courageously, never disheartened,
your holy foot braves all of this.
Hell rages, and hastens to prepare
cruelties for you, Holy One.

8. Aria

Despised, condemned sinners,
accursed children of darkness,
do not swear to kill your Savior!
Soon earth and heaven will break asunder
and He will avenge His honor
as your judge and as your God.

Then from the strikes of the avenger
no flight into deep caves will protect you,
when your ear hears the thunder.

Then he will repay your deeds
and spare no villain
who still dishonors his holy blood.

9. Recitative

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.

EVANGELIST. But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled.

10. Aria

Though they may always hate you, my Savior,
and the world and friends may abandon you,
my belief holds you fast.

They may revile, they may curse:

When everything forsakes me,

I will seek my life once again in you.

11. Chorale

I will stay here with 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 bosom.

12. 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?

EVANGELIST. They answered and said,

CHORUS. He is guilty of death.

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?

13. Chorale

I, I and my sins,
which are countless as grains
of sand by the sea,
they have caused you
the misery that besets you,
and this sad throng of torments.

14. Recitative

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 Nazareth.

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 bewrayeth thee.

EVANGELIST. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying,

PETER. I know not the man.

15. Aria

Do not abandon him, you much-loved friends!

Remain faithful to him, deride the arrogance of the enemies;

no man does battle: God leads the fight.

And if you never leave the Savior,
his hand will take yours lovingly,
and lead you to eternal bliss.

16. Recitative

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

17. Chorale

To your weak child
who stands on weary feet,
give swiftly your hand of mercy
until the fear passes by!
Guide me like a youth
that the fiend may not boast:
to have conquered such a heart
as sets its hope upon You.

18. 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.

19. Accompanied Recitative

Spare the blood of the righteous,
you pitiless judges, let your burning wrath abate,
consider what you do!

Do not encumber yourself with injustices
and unheard-of cruelties!
The mouth of the Savior teaches peace.
Through him you and we alike
are granted his father's heavenly realm
in his son.

Do not be incensed! The son
once on his father's throne
will avenge the disobedience
and utter a judgment of damnation.

20. Aria

My Savior, soon will you pour out your blood,
soon will it, God and Lord, like streams, flow
for me and my salvation.

Well now, so will I gather it up safely in my faith
and never abandon you even in death:
you live and remain in eternity.

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 delivered 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 persuaded 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 crucified. 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.

24. Chorale

You noble visage,
before it the great powers of the world
are terrified and intimidated;
how you are spat upon!
How pale you have grown!
Who has so scandalously injured
the light of your eyes,
which no other light equals?

25. Recitative

EVANGELIST. 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.

26. Aria

Now my Savior walks on untrodden ways
to meet his death
and himself carries the stem of his cross.
I want to accompany you with all the faithful
to the sufferings that are near at hand
o lamb, strangled for the salvation of the world!

27. 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 Golgotha, 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. 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. Aria

My Savior closes his eyelids;
his head sinks weakly down,
sinks deep down toward the earth.
Now will I practice goodness,
eternally love the cross of the Savior,
who gave his life here for me.

29. Chorale

I thank you from my heart,
O Jesus, dearest friend,
for the pains of your death,
since your intention is so good.
Ah, deign that I abide
with 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.