

*PREPARING A NEW ENGLISH EDITION
OF BACH'S "ST. MATTHEW PASSION"*

by
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Most of the choral singers who make up Britain's thriving choirs and choral societies will have sung Bach's great Passions in English at some time or another. Once upon a time they would have had a choice of editions to work from, prepared by the leading organists and musicians of the day. Latterly there has only been one option. Since the last 50 years have seen such tremendous advances in the understanding and performance practice of Baroque music, today's performers have been left with a simple choice to make : either to perform the *St. Matthew Passion* in outdated English editions, or to opt for the modern scholarship of a German edition and perform it in a language which puts the drama and great spirituality of this masterpiece at one remove from the audience.

Having known this work for all of my singing life I am one of those who believes that a performance in English reaches a wider audience and has a more compelling effect on all except the most hardened of Baroque-music aficionados. Since most Easter performances are, in essence, acts of worship, it makes sense to do the worshipping in the vernacular.

I was brought up on an edition of the work edited by C.V.Stanford. We performed it every year in Westminster Abbey where I was a boy chorister. When I later came to sing the part of the Evangelist in the Elgar/Atkins edition there were little bits of this edition that I missed..... and so my interest in the subject was born. Throughout the 1970s I sang the Arias every year with the *Bach Choir* at the Royal Festival Hall, London, recording it under the baton of Sir David Willcocks for a disc which is still in the catalogue. And here I met the "Bach Choir" version. Well, not so much a *version* as a collection of suggestions for updating the text, gathered from eminent singers who had close links with the choir. Contributors included Eric Greene, John Carol Case, and - most influentially - Peter Pears. Over the 30 years that I have been singing the *St. Matthew Passion* I have collected all of these differing ideas together, with other variants from the present generation of singers. It seemed sensible that a new edition, then, should spring from the people that know the work best - the performers.

I have been very lucky to have been able to draw on some eminent colleagues for help in the preparation of this edition. Firstly I must acknowledge the help given to me by *Sir David Willcocks*, conductor of the *Bach Choir* from 1960-98, and my mentor from my days as a Choral Scholar at King's College, Cambridge, who loaned me his score and parts, and kept a watchful eye on the undertaking. This edition is, in fact, dedicated to the *Bach Choir of London*, whose tradition of annual performances in English stretches back

over a hundred years. I am immensely grateful to them for giving me access to the records and working papers relating to their various versions of the text. Singers who have taken an active part in advising me include several leading Evangelists of our day, such as *Robert Tear* and *Ian Partridge*.

There have been three elements to the preparation of this edition.

1. The need to respect Bach's notes has led to a complete overhaul of how the English text fits the music. When the original translations were produced in the 19th century, their editors felt that sacred writ was unalterable. Consequently Bach's notation suffered considerably, particularly in those places where the German biblical text had more (or less) syllables than the Authorised Version.

The answer to this problem has been to retain the Authorised Version wherever practicable, (although in a way that allows of some latitude in substituting alternative words where necessary), and to utilise the alterations provided by the Bach Choir text or those in common parlance amongst today's generation of singers. The Authorised Version has been chosen as a text that will never *date* like modern translations of the Bible are dating. Since the text of the Lutheran Bible which Bach was setting was already antique, and - in places - quaint by the beginning of the 18th Century, we are merely replicating this situation by retaining the majestic prose of the King James Bible. Occasionally there has been the need to rethink a passage totally; but the language used has always been derived from the Authorised text. No anomalies have been allowed to creep in. Each of Bach's notes is now represented, and the lacunae of previous editions have been restored. Some note lengths have been tampered with, but none has ever been altered by more than a half - thus (to be technical for a moment) a crotchet can appear as two quavers, or two crotchets may be sung as a minim. Some slurring has been allowed - but, once again, subject to strict restrictions : only two notes may ever be slurred over one syllable. This has allowed the text to proceed at pace without the addition of "makeweight" words that are included simply to make up enough syllables.

2. The non-biblical text has also been thoroughly overhauled. The *St. Matthew Passion* contains a succession of Arias, Choruses and Chorales which reflect on the story as it unfolds. Apart from the traditional Chorales (the hymns of the Lutheran Church) these are the work of *Christian Friedrich Henrici*, 1700-64, whose nom de plume was *Picander*. The first person to translate the *St. Matthew* into English was *Helen Johnston* (1813-1887) and the translation of these texts provided her with the greatest hurdle. She prepared the translations for Sterndale Bennett's edition of 1862, which remained the only one in use for 32 years until the *Rev. John Troutbeck* (1832-1899) produced his version in 1894. His text utilises variant Biblical readings from the Revised Version and tries to improve on those areas where Johnston was thought to be weakest. But there are several places where he reuses her text without acknowledgement.

These two English texts are the basis for all later editions. Stanford's 1910 edition ignores *Troutbeck* and uses *Johnston* throughout, improving it here and there. Elgar/Atkins brought out the first version of their famous edition in 1911 and carried the

revision process one stage further. They looked at both existing translations side by side, and selected a line from one, and then a line from the other, and so on. The end result does justice to neither translator and wreaks havoc with the rhyme-scheme (for these parts of the text are written in rhyme). There have been other versions still : in 1906 the German publishing house of Breitkopf & Hartel brought out an English-only edition edited by Salomon Jadassohn, with a completely new translation by *Claude Aveling* (1869-1943). Other German editions have been issued with a translation printed below the original German text, as is the case with the most authoritative edition of recent days - the Barenreiter edition of 1974. However, this translation, by the American Henry S. Drinker, looks more like a guide to the meaning of the German than a true alternative - singable - version.

So, apart from the unpublished work of the *Bach Choir*, there has been little new in the way of an English translation for 84 years! One significant exception was the revision of the Elgar/Atkins edition undertaken in 1938 by Ivor Atkins (Elgar having died four years previously). Although this tried to get nearer to Bach's rhythms and word stresses than the 1911 version, it was but one step in the direction that such a revision would ultimately have to go.

My concern has been to restore the rhyme scheme whenever possible and to make sure that each of Bach's syllables has an English syllable of similar stress. I have also tried, wherever possible, to keep to the translation of either *Johnston* or *Troutbeck* within an individual movement. When they are good they are very good (for example numbers 19, 31, 48, 53, 70 are the work of Helen Johnston who was particularly good at translating the chorales, whilst numbers 28, 33, 44, 47, and 74 are by John Troutbeck who had a way with telling phrases in the arias.) In many other places the work is principally by one or the other, with only minor modifications having been made. Where neither Johnston or Troutbeck sound right to our late 20th century ears I have also taken note of *Claude Aveling's* work : in this I am following in the footsteps of the Bach Choir, whose text has always contained some variants from his 1906 version, especially in no. 41 which neither Johnston or Troutbeck translated well.

The 1911 Elgar/Atkins edition introduced some Chorale texts by well-known Hymn writers of the day. Many of these cannot be improved upon; and so the translation of no.63 retains *Sir Henry Baker's* magnificent "O sacred head surrounded" (written for the first edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* which he compiled in 1861); whilst other numbers - such as 21, 23 and 72 - retain the translations of *Frances Cox*, *Catherine Winkworth* and *James Alexander* which were selected from chorale hymnologies by the eminent Bach scholar Charles Sanford Terry (1864-1936).

3. The third element included in this performing edition is an attempt to bring it right up to date in a scholarly sense. These days we are enormously helped by having access to Bach's actual manuscript, as revealed in the pages of the *Urtext der Neuen Bach-Ausgabe* (1972)

By cross-checking the notes (a long and arduous task) I have been able to correct

a significant number of errors that were present in the Bach-Gesellschaft Edition of 1856, and which have crept into subsequent editions based upon it. These include wrong instrumentation, wrong notes, wrong figures for the figured bass, and wrong phrasing. Other errors that have been continuously performed wrong in the Elgar/Atkins editions of 1911 and 1938 have been corrected.

The question of the *phrasing* has been one of the knottier problems to solve. Bach's autograph full score does not always correspond with the autograph orchestral parts, necessitating some editorial decision-making. Also, a phrase appearing (say) at the end of a movement does not always have an identical phrasing the first time it appears. Bach presumably made mistakes in such matters, or his pen didn't make an absolutely accurate mark - it is amazing how such things can happen when you are writing at speed (as Bach was)! Also, phrasing of identical music played by different instruments (or voices) often reveals discrepancies. The 19th century editors did their best to tidy this up; but in an age that had forgotten everything about 18th century performance practice they did it with 19th century values in mind. It is now possible to look again at what Bach wrote and make a better guess at his intentions. For example, since the growth of the *authentic performance* movement in recent years, we now understand that different instruments need to phrase things differently. It appears that Bach was right after all!

So, my job has been to undo all the 19th century phrasing, and restore what was originally there. Occasionally I have had to sort out the odd discrepancy; but otherwise you will be hearing things just as they appear in Bach's manuscript. In doing this I have felt like a restorer at work on an old-master painting, stripping away the layers of dirt and grime to find the true colours lying below..... And if, at the end of the performance, you feel that you have been listening to a truly authentic performance of this masterpiece - *which just happened to be in your own language* - then I shall certainly have achieved my most important objective.

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