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Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, BWV 248, and the Jews

Daniel R. Melamed

The parody origin of most of J. S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, BWV 248, has been recognized since the work's reemergence in the nineteenth century. That is, most of its arias and poetic choruses can be traced to music Bach had first composed for other purposes, and there are signs of musical reuse as well in the few poetic movements for which no model survives. Attention has occasionally also turned to the origin of the gospel narrative portion of the work. In the early twentieth century, the claim was made that one choral setting of the words of a group was also a parody, and this hypothesis has subsequently been expanded to additional gospel choral movements said to be based on older music. This is almost certainly wrong, but the idea has hung on in scholarly writings, reference works, and popular literature on the *Christmas Oratorio*.

The persistence of this claim stems from a particular view of the *Christmas Oratorio* and its place among Bach's church compositions, especially its relation to the passion settings. It is entwined with a scholarly and practical obsession with a lost work by Bach and to the quest for its recovery. And it is tied disturbingly to stereotypes of Jews and their musical depiction. In this regard its perpetuation calls attention to an unsettling legacy of interpretation we need to confront and abandon.

Bach compiled and composed BWV 248 for the Christmas season 1734–35 in Leipzig. Each of its six parts, designed to be performed one at a time over 12 days starting with Christmas Day and ending with Epiphany, incorporates a modest amount of gospel narrative framed and sometimes interrupted by poetic commentary in the form of solo and tutti arias, instrumentally accompanied recitatives, and settings of individual chorale stanzas. Most of the music of parts 1–4 derived from two occasional works Bach had composed for the Saxon royal household (BWV 213 and 214); one number in part 5 is from a third such piece (BWV 215); and the rest of parts 5 and 6 are evidently parodies of a lost model.¹ Two movements were newly composed after Bach evidently abandoned plans to base them on older music.²

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¹ At least some of the music of these parts was used in a lost church cantata; see Andreas Glöckner, "Eine Michaeliskantate als Parodievorlage für den sechsten Teil des Bachschen Weihnachtsoratoriums?" *Bach-Jahrbuch* 86 (2000): 317–26. Recent unpublished work by a Boston University seminar led by Joshua Rifkin suggests that a lost secular cantata was the ultimate source of much of the music of the last two parts.

² The work's history is summarized in Alfred Dürr, *Johann Sebastian Bach. Weihnachts-Oratorium BWV 248* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1967); Walter Blankenburg, *Das Weihnachts-Oratorium von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1982); and Ignace Bossuyt, *Johann Sebastian Bach, Christmas Oratorio (BWV 248)*, trans. Stratton Bull (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004).

Most of this was known by the middle of the nineteenth century; there were continued discussions of the meaning of the work's parody origins, which baffled some commentators, but nothing really new on the work's genesis appeared until a 1916 article in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* by one Gerhard Freiesleben.³ Freiesleben claimed that a two-section gospel chorus originated in older music, an assertion that extended the parody origins of the *Christmas Oratorio* beyond its concerted poetic numbers into its gospel setting. The music in question is from the opening narrative of part 5 and consists of the words of the wise men beginning "Wo ist der neugeborne König der Jüden?" Bach's librettist supplied an interpolated poetic text, set as an accompagnato, that answers the wise men's question (See Example 1, below).

Example 1: J. S. Bach, Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248/45

Vn/Ob I

Vn/Ob II

Va

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Bc

Wo, wo, wo ist der neu-gebor-ne Kö-nig der Jü-den, wo ist der neu-gebor-ne Kö-nig der

Wo, wo, wo, wo ist der neu-gebor-ne Kö-nig der

Wo, wo, wo, wo ist der neu-gebor-ne Kö-nig der

Wo, wo, wo, wo ist der neu-gebor-ne Kö-nig der

6 4 6 3

³ Gerhard Freiesleben, "Ein neuer Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte von J. S. Bachs Weihnachtsoratorium," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 83, nos. 29/30 (1916): 237–38 and Beilage 1–2.

Vln/Ob. I

Vln/Ob. II

Vla

Sop.

Alt.

Tn.

Bs

Bc.

ist der neu-ge-bor-ne Kö-nig der Jü-den? wo, wo, wo, wo?

Jü-den, wo ist der neu-ge - bor-ne Kö-nig der Jü-den? wo, wo? Sucht ihn in mei-ner

Jü-den, wo ist der neu-ge - bor-ne Kö-nig der Jü-den? wo, wo?

Jü-den, wo ist der neu-ge - bor-ne Kö-nig der Jü-den? wo, wo?

6 6 6 6 7

Vln/Ob. I

Vln/Ob. II

Vla

Sop.

Alt.

Tn.

Bs

Bc.

Brust, hier wohnt er, mir und ihm zur Lust!

Wir ha - ben

Wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge -

3 1 6/2 7 3 6

Vln/Ob. I

Vln/Ob. II

Vla

Sop.

Alt.

Tn.

Bs

Bc.

Wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge - se - hen im

Wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge - se - hen im Mor - gen -

sei - nen Stern ge - se - hen im Mor - gen - lan - de,

se - hen im Mor - gen - lan - de, wir ha - ben

4 6 5 4 6 6 6 3 6 5

Vln/Ob. I

Vln/Ob. II

Vla

Sop.

Alt.

Tn.

Bs

Bc.

Mor - gen - lan - de, wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge -

lan - de, im Mor - gen - lan - de, wir ha - ben

wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge - se - hen im Mor - gen - lan -

sei - nen Stern ge - se - hen im Mor - gen - lan - de, wir ha - ben

4 6 6 5 3 6 7 6 6

Vln/Ob. I
Vln/Ob. II
Vla

Sop.
se - hen im Mor - gen - lan - de im Mor - gen - lan - de und sind

Alt.
sei - nen Stern ge - se - hen im Mor - gen - lan - de und sind

Tn.
de, sei - nen Stern ge - se - hen im Mor - gen - lan - de

Bs.
sei - nen Stern ge - se - hen im Mor - gen - lan - de

Bc.

9 6 6 4 5 4 6 4 5 1

Vln/Ob. I
Vln/Ob. II
Vla

Sop.
kom - men, ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn an - zu - be -

Alt.
kom - men, ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn

Tn.
und sind kom - men, ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn an - zu -

Bs.
und sind kom - men, ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn an - zu -

Bc.

5 6 7 7 4 3 6 5 7 2 6 6 3 6 6

Vln/Ob. I

Vln/Ob. II

Vla

Sop.

Alt.

Tn.

Bs

Bc.

7 6 4 6 5

[Da Jesus geboren war zu Bethlehem im jüdischen Lande zur Zeit des Königes Herodis, siehe, da kamen die Weisen vom Morgenlande gen Jerusalem und sprachen:] Wo ist der neugeborne König der Jüden?

*Sucht ihn in meiner Brust;
Hier wohnt er, mir und ihm zur Lust!*

*Wir haben seinen Stern gesehen im
Morgenlande und sind kommen, ihn
anzubeten. [Mt 2: 1–2]*

*Wohl euch, die ihr dies Licht gesehen,
Es ist zu eurem Heil geschehen!
[Mein Heiland, du, du bist das Licht,
Das auch den Heiden scheinen sollen,
Und sie, sie kennen dich noch nicht,
Als sie dich schon verehren wollen.
Wie hell, wie klar muss nicht dein Schein,
Geliebter Jesu, sein!]*

[When Jesus was born at Bethlehem in the Jewish region at the time of King Herod, look: there came the wise men of the Orient to Jerusalem, saying:] Where is the newborn King of the Jews?

*Seek him in my breast;
Here he dwells, to my and his delight!*

*We have seen his star in the Orient and have
come to worship him.*

*Well for you, you who have seen this light;
It has taken place for your salvation!
[You, my Savior, you are the light
That shall shine also to the gentiles,
And they, they do not know you yet,
As they already want to revere you.
How bright, how clear must not your
luminosity be, Beloved Jesus!]
(trans. M. Marissen)*

Freiesleben claimed that the wise men's music had been adapted from Bach's lost *St. Mark Passion*, BWV 247—in particular from the gospel chorus “Pfui dich, wie fein zerbrichst du den Tempel” (See Example 2, below).

Example 2: Gerhard Freiesleben's reconstruction of “Pfui dich, wie fein zerbrichst du den Tempel” from J. S. Bach, St. Mark Passion, BWV 247

Sopran
Pfui, wo, wo ist der neu-ge-bor-ne Kö-nig der Ju-den, wo dich, wie fein zer-brichst du den Tempel, pfui dich! wo? Und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, sei-nen Stern ge-se-hen im Mor-gen-lan-de, hilf dir nun sel-ber, und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, hilf dir nun sel-ber, im Mor-gen-lan-de, und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, hilf dir nun sel-ber, im Mor-gen-lan-de.

Alt
Pfui, wo, wo ist der neu-ge-bor-ne Kö-nig der Ju-den, wo dich, wie fein zer-brichst du den Tempel, pfui dich! wo? Und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, sei-nen Stern ge-se-hen im Mor-gen-lan-de, hilf dir nun sel-ber, und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, hilf dir nun sel-ber, im Mor-gen-lan-de, und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, hilf dir nun sel-ber, im Mor-gen-lan-de.

Tenor
Pfui, wo, wo ist der neu-ge-bor-ne Kö-nig der Ju-den, wo dich, wie fein zer-brichst du den Tempel, pfui dich! wo? Und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, sei-nen Stern ge-se-hen im Mor-gen-lan-de, hilf dir nun sel-ber, und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, hilf dir nun sel-ber, im Mor-gen-lan-de, und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, hilf dir nun sel-ber, im Mor-gen-lan-de.

Baß
Pfui, wo, wo ist der neu-ge-bor-ne Kö-nig der Ju-den, wo dich, wie fein zer-brichst du den Tempel, pfui dich! wo? Und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, sei-nen Stern ge-se-hen im Mor-gen-lan-de, hilf dir nun sel-ber, und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, hilf dir nun sel-ber, im Mor-gen-lan-de, und bauest ihn in drei-en Ta-gen, hilf dir nun sel-ber, im Mor-gen-lan-de.

10 und bauest ihn in drei.en Ta.gen, hilf dir nun sel - ber, hilf dir nun sel.ber, und
wir ha.ben sei.nen Stern ge.se.hen im Mor.gen.lan.de, im Mor.gen.lan.de, und sind

11 sel.ber, und bau.est ihn in drei.en Ta.gen, hilf dir nun sel - ber, und
lan.de, wir ha.ben sei.nen Stern ge.se.hen im Mor.gen.lan.de, und sind

12 Ta.gen, hilf dir nun sel - ber, hilf dir nun sel.ber, hilf dir nun sel.ber,
se.hen im Mor.gen.lan.de, sei.nen Stern ge.se.hen im Mor.gen.lan.de,

dir nun sel - ber, und bau.est ihn in drei.en Ta.gen, hilf dir nun sel - ber,
Morgen.lan.de, wir ha.ben sei.nen Stern ge.se.hen im Mor.gen.lan.de,

13 steig her ab und steig her ab vom Kreuz, und steig her ab vom Kreuz, steig
kom - men, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu.be -

14 steig her ab vom Kreuz und steig her.ab vom Kreuz und steig her
kom - men, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn

(Br.) und steig her ab vom Kreuz, und steig her.ab vom Kreuz, und steig her
und sind kom - men, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn

15 und steig her ab, und steig her ab her ab vom Kreuz, und steig her ab steig her.
und sind kom - men, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu.be - ten, ihn an - zu -

16 (Viol.) Variante I Variante II
her ab vom Kreuz! vom Kreuz! hilf dir nun sel.ber, und bau.est ihn in drei.en
ten. ten. Mor - gen.lan.de, wir ha.ben sei.nen Stern ge.

ab vom Kreuz! vom Kreuz! sel.ber, und bau.est ihn in drei.en Ta.gen, bau.est
an.zu.be - ten. ten. lan.de, sei.nen Stern ge.se.hen, ha.ben

ab vom Kreuz! vom Kreuz! und bau.est ihn in drei.en Ta.gen, hilf dir nun
be - ten. ten. wir ha.ben sei.nen Stern ge.se.hen, im Mor.gen.lan.de, hilf dir nun

ab vom Kreuz! vom Kreuz! ihn in drei.en Ta.gen, hilf dir nur sel - ber, und bau.est
be - ten. ten. sei.nen Stern ge.se.hen im Mor.gen.lan.de, wir ha.ben

[Und die vorüber giengen, lästerten ihn, und schüttelten ihre Häupter, und sprachen:] Pfui dich, wie fein zerbrichst du den Tempel, und bauest ihn in dreyen Tagen! Hilff dir nun selber, und steig herab vom Creutze. [Mk 15: 29]

[And those passing by scoffed him, shaking their heads, and saying,] Pfui—how exactlyngly you destroy the Temple, and build it in three days! Save yourself now, and climb down from the cross. (trans. M. Marissen, adapted)

Freiesleben was probably set down this path because of the peculiar status of BWV 247. Its complete libretto is known, and even though no musical sources survive, some of the score has long been regarded as within reach. Many of the passion's numerous chorales are probably transmitted in collections of Bach's four-part settings. Some of its solo and tutti arias were clearly planned as parodies, particularly of movements from the so-called *Ode of Mourning*, BWV 198, that Bach had composed for a royal/electoral memorial service in 1729. Within limits, these concerted numbers can also be recovered to some degree, though with questions about key, instrumentation, the recomposition of vocal lines to accommodate new texts—and even about whether planned parodies were actually carried out. The lost gospel narrative is another matter and evidently became an irresistible challenge, particularly for those for whom passion settings stand at the center of Bach's output. These feelings have arguably contributed to the zeal with which people have attempted to “reconstruct” the *St. Mark Passion* in many different ways, seeking to salve the wound the loss appears to represent.⁴

Freiesleben's kind of argument—that a known work originated in a lost model—depends on two things: the suggestion that we should suspect a parody in the first place from characteristics (particularly defects) of an extant piece; and the claim that a reconstructed hypothetical older version of a work itself makes musical and textual sense, perhaps even better sense than the supposedly derived version. Having found fault with the *Christmas Oratorio* movement (we will return to his objections in a moment), Freiesleben proposes an earlier version bearing the *St. Mark* text and defends it as likely:

Above all, exactly those passages in the oratorio that appeared conspicuous and unstylistic are now clarified as most natural. One can hardly imagine that Bach could have composed “Pfui dich” in another way, as this beginning in fact demonstrates with the wildly ejaculated “Pfui” reinforced with orchestral offbeats. “Und bauest ihn in dreien Tagen,” with its lofty towers, is of immense pictorial power, namely in mm. 8–9, in which the men's voices cry out over each other in harsh high ranges.⁵

Freiesleben is eager to justify his hypothesis by pointing to pictorial and text-expressive features of the reconstructed model. We can note his appeal to its “natural” character, a strategy by which the supposed original version is claimed to make more sense than the surviving one. The hypothesis does require the author to account for some difficulties. The many adjustments he is forced to make in his “reconstruction” to accommodate the passion text are justified as typical of

⁴ The history is traced in Daniel R. Melamed, *Hearing Bach's Passions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 97–110. Two further printed librettos from repeat performances have since turned up; see Tatjana Schabalina, “‘Texte zur Music’ in Sankt Petersburg. Neue Quellen zur Leipziger Musikgeschichte sowie zur Kompositions- und Aufführungstätigkeit Johann Sebastian Bachs,” *Bach-Jahrbuch* 94 (2008): 33–98.

⁵ “Vor allem aber erklären sich nunmehr gerade diejenigen Stellen, die bei dem Chor im Oratorium auffällig und stilwidrig erscheinen, auf die natürlichste Weise. Man kann sich kaum vorstellen, daß Bach das ‘Pfui dich’ auf eine andere Art habe vertonen können, als es dieser Anfang mit dem wild hervorgestoßenen, durch Orchesternachschläge verstärkten ‘Pfui’ tatsächlich zeigt. Das ‘und bauest ihn in dreien Tagen’ ist mit seinem Emportürmen von ungeheurer Bildkraft, namentlich in Takt 8 und 9, wo sich die Männerstimmen in der grellen Höhenlage gegenseitig überschreien,” 238.

the parody process. Even the character of the autograph score, pretty clearly in Bach's working script rather than the fair-copy hand typically found in parodies, is explained away as the product of the many revisions that may have been necessary in making the parody.⁶

We can probably understand the lengths to which Freiesleben is willing to go in defending his hypothesis in light of the article's telling last sentence: "And so we can consider ourselves convinced, without objection, that here a heretofore unrecognized fragment of the *St. Mark Passion* has again come to light."⁷ An essay whose title has promised a discussion of the *Christmas Oratorio* has revealed its true aim: the rediscovery of music from the *St. Mark Passion*. This, I think, is the real driving force here and the one responsible for a suspension of skepticism about the parody origin of these movements from BWV 248.

But even more striking is the other half of the author's argument—the basis of his suspicion of this *Christmas Oratorio* chorus in the first place:

Alert listeners to the *Christmas Oratorio* will not miss the fact that the chorus of wise men from the East, "Wo ist der neugeborne König der Juden," is distinctly lacking in the bulk of the characteristics that we are otherwise accustomed to in Bach, and that in its effect, if one compares for example the wondrous setting of the same passage in Mendelssohn's *Christus* fragment, there is something amiss. In fact, the manner of Bach's composition agrees neither with the worthy station of kings nor with the detached calm of wise men, informed by the star and going to worship the new kingly son. They would not storm into a royal palace with the baying call "Wo—wo, wo," would not cut each other off in the manner of "wir haben seinen Stern gesehen" as if they wanted to shout each other down, and most of all, given Bach's sense for the impression of solemn adoration at the destination of their journey, would find other tones than the last measures with their abrupt phrygian cadence.⁸

This extraordinary passage takes a typical approach—it finds problems with a Bach text setting and explains them by parody—but the principal objection here is esthetic. (It hardly seems necessary to point out that a phrygian cadence had been an emblem of a question since the early seventeenth century, or that single-syllable repetition at the start of a choral movement as a rhetorical exordium was stereotyped to the point of cliché in central German repertory.)⁹ This is

⁶ The relevant page from Bach's autograph score, Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, D-B Mus. ms. Bach P 32, f. 52v, is available at http://www.bachdigital.de/receive/BachDigitalSource_source_00000850.

⁷ "So können wir uns immerhin unbedenklich überzeugt halten, daß hier ein bisher unerkanntes Bruchstück der Markuspassion wieder zutage gekommen ist," 238.

⁸ "Aufmerksamen Hörern des Weihnachtsoratoriums wird nicht entgehen, daß der Chor der Weisen aus dem Morgenlande 'Wo ist der neugeborene König der Juden' das Maß der Charakteristik, das wir sonst bei Bach gewöhnt sind, auffallend vermissen läßt und in seiner Wirkung, wenn man beispielsweise die wundervolle Vertonung der gleichen Stelle in Mendelssohns Christus-Fragment danebenhält, einigermaßen verfehlt erscheint. Tatsächlich verträgt sich die Art der Bachschen Komposition weder mit der Würde von Königen noch mit der abgeklärten Ruhe von Weisen, die vom Stern gewiesen zur Anbetung des neuen Königssohnes ziehen. Diese stürmen nicht mit dem bellenden Anruf 'wo—wo, wo' in einen Königspalast, fallen sich nicht in der Art des 'wir haben seinen Stern gesehen' gegenseitig ins Wort, als ob sie einander überschreien wollten, und würden vor allem im Sinne Bachs für den Ausdruck feierlicher Anbetung am Ziele der Fahrt andere Töne finden als die mit dem schroffen phrygischen Schluß abbrechenden letzten Takte," 237.

⁹ See the many examples in *Thüringische Motetten der ersten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts. Nach Ms. 13661 der Königsberger Universitätsbibliothek (Gottholdsche Sammlung)*, DDT 49/50, edited by Max Seiffert; revised edition

said to be a setting unbecoming Bach or the context, pictorially inappropriate measured against certain dramatic ideals.

Those ideals are Mendelssohn's. The piece of his to which Freiesleben refers is from a project that spanned some ten years and was left unfinished at Mendelssohn's death: a three-part oratorio with the working title "Erde, Hölle und Himmel." The surviving portions (probably from the "Erde" section) consist of texts narrating Jesus's birth and a passion section strongly influenced by Bach's works. The title *Christus* under which the fragments were published suggests a kind of combined Christmas oratorio and passion but was probably never used by the composer. It is how Freiesleben knew the piece, though, and the opening text of the surviving fragment happens to correspond exactly to the narrative portion of part 5 of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*.¹⁰ The movement Freiesleben cites is a model of consonance, lyricism, textural subtlety, and vocal order (See Example 3, below).

Example 3: Felix Mendelssohn, [Christus]

The musical score for Example 3, Felix Mendelssohn's [Christus], is presented in a multi-staff format. The top three staves are for vocal parts: Tenore Solo (Tenor), Basso I Solo (Bass I), and Basso II Solo (Bass II). The bottom four staves are for string parts: Viola, Violoncello I (Cello I), Violoncello II (Cello II), and Basso (Double Bass). The score is in the key of D major (one sharp) and common time (C). The tempo is marked 'Andante.' The lyrics are: 'Wo ist der neu-ge-bor-ne Kö-nig der Ju-den? wir ha-ben sei-nen'. The vocal parts are written in treble clef for the Tenor and bass clef for the Basses. The string parts are written in their respective clefs (Viola in alto clef, Cello and Double Bass in bass clef). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, slurs, and dynamics like 'p' (piano) and 'pizz.' (pizzicato).

by Hans Joachim Moser (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1960); to say nothing of a movement like "Wir, wir, wir haben keinen König denn den Keiser" from BWV 245, which Freiesleben may well have been thinking of.

¹⁰ On Mendelssohn's work see Jeffrey Sposato, *The Price of Assimilation: Felix Mendelssohn and the Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Tbn ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge - sehn, und sind ge - kom - men ihn an - zu -
 Bs Stern, sei - nen Stern ge - sehn, und sind ge - kom - men ihn an - zu -
 Bs II sei - nen Stern ge - sehn, und sind ge - kom - men ihn an - zu -
 Vla
 Vc I
 Vc II
 Bs

Tbn be - ten, und sind ge - kom - men ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn
 Bs be - ten, und sind ge - kom - men ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn
 Bs II be - -ten, und sind ge - kom - men ihn an - zu - be - ten, ihn
 Vla
 Vc I
 Vc II
 Bs

Tbn
an - zu - be - ten. Wo ist der neu - ge - bor - ne Kö - nig der

Bs
an - zu - be - ten. Wo ist der neu - ge - bor - ne Kö - nig der

Bs II
an - zu - be - ten. Wo ist der neu - ge - bor - ne Kö - nig der

Vla

Vc I

Vc II

Bs

Tbn
Ju - den? wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge - seh'n, wir ha - ben

Bs
Ju - den? wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge - seh'n, wir ha - ben

Bs II
Ju - den? wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge - seh'n, wir ha - ben

Vla

Vc I

Vc II

Bs

Tbn
 sei - nen Stern ge - seh'n, und sind ge - kom - men

Bs
 sei - nen Stern ge - seh'n, und sind ge - kom - men ihn an - zu -

Bs II
 sei - nen Stern ge - seh'n, und sind ge - kom - -men, und sind ge - kom - men ihn

Vla

Vc I

Vc II

Bs
 arco pizz.

Tbn
 - ihn an - zu - be - ten. Wir ha - ben sei - - nen Stern ge -

Bs
 be - ten. Wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge -

Bs II
 an - zu - be - ten. Wir ha - ben sei - nen Stern ge -

Vla

Vc I

Vc II

Bs

The image shows a musical score for a section of BWV 248. It consists of seven staves: Tbn (Trumpet), Bs (Bassoon), Bs II (Bassoon II), Vla (Viola), Vc I (Violin I), Vc II (Violin II), and Bs (Bass). The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal parts (Tbn, Bs, Bs II) have the lyrics "seh'n." written below them. The instrumental parts include dynamics such as *f* (forte) and *p* (piano). The score is divided into three measures.

I hardly need to stress how complicated it is for Freiesleben to have invoked Mendelssohn, of all people, as the composer who shows the proper Christian reverence in setting this New Testament narrative. But even leaving that issue aside, Freiesleben’s reasoning (if that is the right word) is obviously problematic as a guide to the parody origin of this music from the *Christmas Oratorio*. To criticize the work in this way is to acknowledge it as fundamentally flawed and beneath Bach. In fact, only a commentator who found essential problems with the *Christmas Oratorio* could put forward an argument like this; Freiesleben is here an apologist for BWV 248.

But there is more here because his language is unmistakable in its tone and diction. In speaking of “storming” (“stürmen”), a “baying call” (“bellende Anruf”), shouting over one another, and generally inappropriate vocal behavior, Freiesleben invokes the acoustic stereotype of the Jew. The passage cites cacophony, noise, and disorder—exactly the sounds most closely associated with Jews.¹¹ In Freiesleben’s view this *Christmas Oratorio* chorus is a parody because it is in the voice of gentile kings but sounds like Jews, an essential contradiction. His objection thus may not be esthetic but rather a matter of fundamental discomfort with the idea that figures in the narrative who recognize the divinity of Jesus are represented in this way.

¹¹ On this topic see Ruth HaCohen, *The Music Libel Against the Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). One does not need to look any further than Richard Wagner’s *Das Judentum in der Musik* to find parallel characterizations of Jewish speech and music.

Freiesleben goes a step further with this same line of thought, not only finding problems with the *Christmas Oratorio* chorus by reference to the acoustic stereotype of Jews, but also identifying a likely parody model in the same way:

This characterization, pointing much more closely to the Jew choruses of the passions, whose inadequate effect Bach perhaps consciously tried to mitigate by the insertion of the arioso measures, gives rise to the presumption that this chorus, like so many other movements in the work, is a borrowing and originally must have had a different textual basis.

If one seeks the place from which the chorus could originate, the aforementioned conspicuous similarity in compositional technique points the gaze foremost to the Jew choruses of the lost passions, of which the one according to Mark (1731) is chronologically closest to the oratorio. The number of Jew choruses in *Mark* is, as in *Matthew*, rather small. It is all the more striking that there is one among them whose text can be underlaid word for word without the slightest difficulty in our choral movement. It is the first chorus of the Jews before the cross and reads: "Pfui dich, wie fein zerbrichest du den Tempel."¹²

Freiesleben takes for granted that there is such a thing as a "Jew chorus" associated with a particular compositional technique. The claim that the text from Mark can be underlaid "without the slightest difficulty" is belied by the explanations the author makes of his alterations and adjustments, and by the several alternatives he offers for one passage in his reconstruction. The argument is also loaded because in 1916 there was no known evidence of any other lost passion setting by Bach; the proximity of the date 1731 is convenient for his claim, but it's not as though there were multiple candidates of which the *St. Mark Passion*, BWV 247, was the most likely.

The idea that the musical style of the movement somehow pointed to a chorus of Jews and that the music from BWV 248 belongs with these words is all the more loaded because of Martin Luther's translation of this passage. The opening words "Pfui dich," typically rendered "Ah" or "Aha" in most English versions, following the Greek, are connected with the German word for spitting.¹³ (Compare the expression "Pfui Teufel" with its associated spitting, and probably the Yiddish interjection "feh.") This expression was presumably meant to resonate with the Gospels' description of Jesus being spat upon, a loaded text by any measure and a particularly ugly phrase

¹² "Diese weit eher auf die Jüdenchöre der Passionen hinweisende Charakterisierung, deren herausfallende Wirkung Bach vielleicht bewußt ermaßen durch Einschiebung der Arioso-takte mildern wollte, läßt die Vermutung auftauchen, daß auch dieser Chor wie so viele andere Sätze des Werkes eine Entlehnung ist und ursprünglich eine andere Textgrundlage gehabt haben muß. Versucht man die Stelle zu finden, woher der Chor stammen kann, so lenkt die erwähnte affallende Ähnlichkeit der Kompositionstechnik den Blick in erster Linie auf die Jüdenchöre der verlorengangenen Passionen, von denen die nach Markus (1731) zeitlich dem Oratorium (1734) am nächsten steht. Die Zahl der Jüdenchöre bei Markus ist ebenso wie bei Matthäus ziemlich gering. Um so frappanter ist es, daß sich unter ihnen einer befindet, dessen Text sich wörtlich genau ohne die geringste Schwierigkeit unserem Chorsatz unterlegen läßt. Es ist die erste Chor der Juden vor dem Kreuz und lautet: 'Pfui dich, wie fein zerbrichest du den Tempel.'" 237.

¹³ See the entry for this word in *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm*, 16 vols. (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1854–1961): "Interjection zum Ausdrucke des Abscheues, Ekels, Unwillens, der Verachtung und des Hohnes; gesteigert durch wirkliches oder angedeutetes Aus- und Anspeien."

for Luther to have ascribed to anyone. Freiesleben's selection of it as a characteristic "Jew chorus" was especially fraught.

Who was this author? Gerhard Julius Freiesleben was born in 1880 and was the son of a prominent Leipzig jurist. He was educated at the Thomasschule and Leipzig University, graduating in law with a 1906 dissertation on the legal status of corporate officers.¹⁴ He practiced law in Leipzig and was the author of a book for nonspecialists on the legal rights of musical authors and publishers.¹⁵

Freiesleben had musical interests and training and published several articles in musical journals, mostly on legal topics. One article is on the justifications for time limits for copyright;¹⁶ this is noteworthy because of Freiesleben's role in the attempt to pass a so-called Lex Parsifal. At issue was the expiration of copyright protection on older works; a group of interested parties (led by Wagner's heirs) campaigned to make an exception for *Parsifal* to help limit its production to Bayreuth. A failed attempt to protect all his works in 1901 was followed by one around 1912 aimed specifically at *Parsifal* and involving a petition signed by 18,000 "German citizens." Freiesleben is cited as chair of the Leipzig faction advocating for the law and wrote to Hans von Wolzogen with strategic advice about the campaign, fearing that "the Jewish press" would seize on details to accuse the Bayreuth leadership of being behind the effort (which in fact they were).¹⁷ Freiesleben's professional interests and expertise touched directly on this musical and political matter. Freiesleben had other Wagnerian connections as well. His book on musical-legal issues quotes the *Meistersinger* libretto on the allowable reuse of others' melodic material, up to four notes.¹⁸

Freiesleben published one other article on a Bach subject, a three-part piece that appeared a year after his *Christmas Oratorio* essay. Its title is "On the Performance of Bach's Large Choral Works," and its starting point is the claim that the modern listener cannot be expected to sit through a three- or four-hour sacred concert performance.¹⁹ The large Bach works thus need to be shortened, and Freiesleben suggests how. The view he expresses of BWV 248 is relevant. Freiesleben acknowledges that the work was never intended to be performed at a stretch but sees the real goal of shortening the *Christmas Oratorio* as mitigating the effect of the breaking up of the narrative into six parts—in other words, in creating what he calls a true "geschlossener Oratorienform." The works that fall for Freiesleben into this desirable category and that should be emulated are, of course, Bach's passion settings, so his exercise in abridgment sought, at least in

¹⁴ Biographical information from the entry in *Jahres-Verzeichnis der an den Deutschen Universitäten erschienenen Schriften XXI* (Berlin: Behrend, 1907), 343. The dissertation is "Die Rechtsstellung der Geschäftsführer einer Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung" (Leipzig, 1906).

¹⁵ *Recht und Tonkunst: Eine Gemeinverständliche Darstellung Des Musikalischen Urheber- und Verlagsrechts* (Leipzig: C. F. W. Siegels Musikalienhandlung, 1914).

¹⁶ "Zeitliche Begrenzung des Urheberrechts," *Neue Musik-Zeitung* [Stuttgart] 33 (1912): 11–14, 68–69.

¹⁷ See Oliver Hilmes, *Herrin des Hügels: Das Leben der Cosima Wagner* (Berlin: Seidler, 2007), 378–79.

¹⁸ *Recht und Tonkunst*, 50.

¹⁹ "Zur Aufführung der großen Bachschen Chorwerke," *Neue Musik-Zeitung* 38 (1917): 152, 166–68, 182–83.

part, to make the *Christmas Oratorio* more like the passions. He further asserts that the “lyrical and contemplative” *Christmas Oratorio* cannot captivate the listener the way the “sublime and tragic” passions can. Here we see evidence of the widespread tendency to judge and interpret the *Christmas Oratorio* in the context of Bach’s passion settings, an approach that goes back to the work’s revival in the middle of the nineteenth century. In Freiesleben’s case, this tendency extends further than usual in light of his earlier article’s assertion that some of the Christmas music was indeed from a passion.

Freiesleben’s poorly argued, implausible, and racist essay could easily be dismissed if it had not been so influential. It independently caught the interest of two authors who perpetuated its conclusions and—in somewhat less explicit but still recognizable form—some of its esthetic foundations as well. The first to make use of it was Ortwin von Holst, whose “Turba-Chöre des Weihnachts-Oratoriums und der Markuspassion” of 1968 strikes a curious posture.²⁰ He claims to find Freiesleben’s argument for the origin of “Pfui dich” in BWV 248 wrong in its reasoning but applauds him for having gotten the right result:

We can nonetheless be glad that Freiesleben came to the happy discovery, by way of this curious false conclusion, of recognizing [“Wo ist der neugeborne König der Jüden”] as a parody whose original he then found to be the “Pfui dich” chorus from the *St. Mark Passion*. In this matter he has not encountered doubt. It remains to his credit to have opened a door here.²¹

Von Holst selectively quotes the 1916 article, leaving out explicit reference to Jews but including all the loaded words. In fact, von Holst never says why he thinks Freiesleben got to the correct outcome with faulty reasoning. He essentially rehashes the earlier article, suggesting a somewhat different text underlay for “Pfui dich” but getting largely the same result, a “reconstructed” chorus from the *St. Mark Passion*, effectively sanitizing the old argument for a modern audience.

He then takes a next step:

[I]t seemed obvious, given the evident and generally accepted identity of the two choruses mentioned above, to examine the other turba choruses from the *Christmas Oratorio* and whether they are likewise parodies of the *St. Mark Passion*. . . . And in fact we find, for the same reasons as were deemed valid for the pair of choruses discussed above, the original form of the chorus ‘Lasset uns nun gehen’ in the *St. Mark Passion*.²²

The piece is the shepherds’ chorus from part 3, and the argument is the same, right down to excusing the rewriting of passages that don’t fit the supposed original text. Von Holst’s arguments

²⁰ Ortwin von Holst, “Turba-Chöre des Weihnachts-Oratoriums und der Markuspassion,” *Musik und Kirche* 38 (1968): 229–33.

²¹ “. . . können wir uns doch darüber freuen, daß Freiesleben über diesen seltsamen Fehlschluss zu dem hochehrwürdigen Fund kam, diesen Chor als eine Parodie zu erkennen, als deren Original er dann den ‘Pfui-Dich’-Chor der Markuspassion fand. Hierin ist er nun nie auf Zweifel gestoßen. Es bleibt sein Verdienst, hier ein Tor aufgetan zu haben,” 229–30.

²² “Dabei lag es doch nahe, nach der erwiesenen un allgemein anerkannten Identität der beiden oben erwähnten Chöre die andern Turba-Chöre des W. O. daraufhin zu prüfen, ob sie nicht ebenfalls Parodien der Markuspassion seien. . . . Und in der Tat find wir mit denselben Begründungen, die für das vorgenannte Chorpaar gelten gemacht wurden, für den Chor ‘Lasset uns nun gehen’ (W. O. 26) die Urgestalt in der Markuspassion,” 231.

for the correctness of his parody hypothesis ring familiar changes, too; features of the ostensibly shared music are found to be affectively appropriate to the passion text. Of a rewritten passage in his hypothetical reconstruction he writes: “How colorless, compared to this vehemently demagogic declamation, the *Christmas Oratorio* text ‘und die Geschichte sehen, die da geschehen ist’ is. Compare the almost helpless declamation of the tenor [in BWV 248] with this picturesque representation.”²³ Even the active instrumental line plays a role in his interpretation; referring to the spot in which the obbligato line introduces a new figure after consistently playing another throughout the piece, von Holst writes:

We discern a final confirmation in the instrumental line that now makes a new impression as a characteristic feature of the *St. Mark Passion*. Blithering, agitated, and agitating, it lends unmistakable features to the proper complexion of the scene up to mm. 20–23, whose new obstinate rhythm is unexpected after the running sixteenths up to this point.²⁴

And the standard is once again pictorialism:

The connection to the violent, destructive word “abbrechen,” on the other hand, strengthens the impression of this scene as significant, whereas in the *Christmas Oratorio* it appeared almost without connection.²⁵

The language here points to troubling thinking, less explicit than in Freiesleben but still emphasizing aspects of so-called turba choruses that align with anti-Jewish sentiment: blithering, demagoguery, vehemence, and obstinacy; his further comments point to a pictorial violence overall. Von Holst’s argument, though less explicit, is really no different from Freiesleben’s.

Von Holst’s article shows another familiar feature in its concluding sentence: “And so in the second turba chorus of the *Christmas Oratorio* we have doubtless rediscovered a further turba chorus from the *St. Mark Passion*.”²⁶ The attraction of BWV 247 continued.

The other author who took up Freiesleben’s article, apparently unaware of von Holst’s, was at least straightforward about his principal interest in recovering BWV 247. Gustav Adolf Theill, in his attempt to reconstruct the *St. Mark Passion* published in 1978, accepts Freiesleben’s conclusion “without doubt” and goes further in asserting that the reconstructed chorus from the *St. Mark Passion* “does not reach the concentrated energy of those in the *St. Matthew Passion*,” particularly the parallel chorus in BWV 244, and thus that the *St. Mark Passion* was likely

²³ “Wie farblos bleibt gegen diese leidenschaftlich demagogische Deklamation der W. O.-Text ‘und die Geschichte sehen, die da geschehen ist.’ Man vergleiche die fast hilflose Deklamation des Tenors mit dieser bildhaften Darstellung,” 232.

²⁴ “Eine letzte Bestätigung endlich lesen wir der Instrumentalstimme ab, die nun als Charakteristikum der Markuspassion neues Gepräge erhält. Geschwätzig, aufgeregt und aufregend vermag sie dem eigentlichen Kolorit der Szene unverwechselbare Züge zu verleihen bis hin zu den Takten 20–23, deren neuer widerhaariger Rythmus nach den bisherigen laufenden Sechzehnteln nicht zu erwarten war,” 233.

²⁵ “Die Verbindung zum gewaltsamen, zerstörerischen Textwort ‘abbrechen’ hingegen verstärkt den Ausdruck dieser Szenen um ein Bedeutendes, wo er im W. O. nahezu beziehungslos erschien,” 233.

²⁶ “So haben wir mit den zweiten Turba-Chor des W. O. zweifellos einen weiteren Turba-Chor der Markuspassion wiedergefunden,” 233.

composed before the *St. Matthew*.²⁷ This is a crazy way to argue for the chronology of Bach's passions, but more important, a concept like "concentrated energy," with all of its implications in this context, is once again the dubious standard by which a gospel chorus is measured.

A consequence of Theill's acceptance of Freiesleben's "discovery" isn't long in coming. He asks, "If there is one use of parody in the *Christmas Oratorio*, why not two or three?" Like von Holst, Theill turns his attention to "Lasset uns nun gehen gen Bethlehem" and finds it likely that there was a model for that piece as well, turning inevitably to the lost *St. Mark Passion*. He settles on "Ja nicht auf das Fest" for reasons of text division.²⁸ Of course, this is a different derivation than the one postulated by von Holst, who saw "Lasset uns nun gehen" as adapted from the passion's "Wir haben gehört, dass er sagte." The rules here are so loose that it is possible to make almost any text fit.

Theill goes on to assert improbably that the *Christmas Oratorio*'s "Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe, und Friede auf Erden, und dem Menschen ein Wohlgefallen" was derived from the lost passion's two "Kreuzige ihn" choruses. This takes some doing, given that the texts are affectively so different. Theill's solution is implicitly to invoke a strain of interpretation of the Christmas work that views it in light of the passion story it is said to anticipate theologically and musically. This is a tendency that arose at the beginning of the oratorio's nineteenth-century reception. It regards Bach foremost as a composer of passion music and the *Christmas Oratorio* as an anomaly to be explained; the solution is to find foreshadowings of the passion story at every turn.²⁹ Theill asserts that both of these texts are about "elevation" in different ways, a theological parallel he says was not out of the question for Bach. The opening motive of a rising fourth is said to be found in the passions (and cantatas) and to be an invocation of the cross by its reference to the numeral 4.³⁰ This represents the sort of ad hoc esoteric argument one encounters frequently, but it resonates especially strongly because of a tendency for commentators to link the *Christmas Oratorio* to passion settings whenever possible.

Some of this speculation has stuck; it is difficult today to find a treatment of the *Christmas Oratorio* that does not mention at least the possibility that its gospel choruses were adapted from

²⁷ Gustav Adolf Theill, *Die Markuspassion von Joh. Seb. Bach (BWV 247): Entstehung—Vergessen—Wiederentdeckung—Rekonstruktion* (Steinfeld: Salvator, 1978), 35.

²⁸ *Die Markuspassion*, 52.

²⁹ The best example lies in the claim that Bach used a passion chorale, "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden," to anticipate the crucifixion even as he was setting the Christmas story to music. This interpretation arose early in the work's modern reception but is almost certainly a nineteenth-century invention based on the misconception that the melody "Herzlich tut mich verlangen" to which the text "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden" was sung was primarily a "passion chorale." This is the impression you might get if all you know is Picander and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (which uses the tune repeatedly with passion texts), but it does not appear to have been an automatic association in the first half of the eighteenth century. This interpretation, in which the *Christmas Oratorio* is more weighty because of its supposed theological anticipation of the crucifixion, apparently goes back to Carl von Winterfeld. The reading has stuck, and almost every modern commentary on BWV 248 repeats this claim. I am grateful to Carolyn Carrier McClimon for sharing her research on this question, "Hearing the 'Töne eines Passionsliedes' in J. S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*: The Nineteenth-Century Critical Reception of BWV 248," *Bach* 45 (2014): 34–67.

³⁰ *Die Markuspassion*, 48.

the *St. Mark Passion*. I find the claims implausible on musical and source-critical grounds, but more important, it is clear that they originate in some disturbing ideologies. And even though the most obviously racist language of Freiesleben's original article is gone, its ideas and code words remain, both in discussions of this topic and in treatments of Bach's oratorios in general. A recent theological interpretation of the *St. John Passion*, for example, describes the "Jesum von Nazareth" choruses sung "as the crowd clamours" for Jesus, this way: "In this movement, the chorus follows the oboes, second violin and viola in a cackle of strings and woodwind. This produces a tumultuous babble of voices, all shouting over each other, while the woodwind mocks Jesus."³¹ "Tumultuous babble," "cackle," and "shouting over each other"—this language could be straight out of the 1916 article.

Alas, Freiesleben's explicit invocations of Jewish stereotypes that launched so much speculation about the *Christmas Oratorio* are not the extent of the problem, nor even are studies that take his dubious results as a starting point. I think there is a bigger issue here because these theories intersect with a modern performance ideal of gospel choral passages in Bach's narrative works, particularly those representing Jews or loosely identified as "crowds," as loud, fast, and vehement. It is not news that this element of Bach performance is the source of many of the difficult questions about anti-Jewish sentiment in these works, but it is now evident that scholarship has been led down essentially the same path. It is time to recognize tainted research, to step away from it, and to take a fresh look at the musical problems involved.

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³¹ Andreas Loewe, *Johann Sebastian Bach's St John Passion (BWV 245): A Theological Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 151.

