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REGIETHEATER AND THE STAGINGS OF BACH'S

ST. MATTHEW PASSION

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Jack Stephens

Abstract

The commonly stated phrase ‘Bach is Universal’ is, in its simplest form, false. Bach composed his music in worship of a specific God, for a particular group of people, at a unique point in time. Yet, there is something about this statement that feels inherently true. Richard Taruskin argues that musicians should not act as ‘museum curators.’ Instead, he believes music is a living entity that elicits different responses from people over time, and it is within these responses that the most ‘authentic’ performances are conceived. It is the living, active state of music that gives Bach’s compositions their ‘universal’ quality – the ability to profoundly affect people throughout time.

Taruskin argues that this is achieved by artists inserting their own context into the interpretation of the work. This paper explores how this is achieved through the staging of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, demonstrating that the reinterpretative tools used by directors are the same as those employed by the *Regietheater* movement, a form of co-authorship between director and composer, which has been popularised in contemporary productions of opera. By examining this, we discover how performing music from the past reflects and reveals the present values of society. This paper explores how this concept can be applied more broadly to Bach’s cantatas, expanding the idea of co-authorship to include not just the author and director, but also the film director and choreographer. In doing so, this research is presented alongside a film, in which the narrative is guided by Bach’s two cantatas *Mein Herzge schwimmt im Blut* BWV 199 and *Christ lag in Todes Banden* BWV 4. A filmed commentary accompanies the film, exploring the creative process and the contextual values revealed through this interpretation.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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1. Bach is Universal

Is Bach universal? John Butt writes, “here is a composer who is universal for all times and peoples; whose music embodies not just beauty, but also the sublime in its overwhelming, superhuman glory” (2017, para. 2). Steven Isserlis talks of “the universal ideals of Bach’s music” (2021, para. 1), Madeline Easton writes that “Bach is like Shakespeare. They both contain universal themes” (2020, para. 1), and Richard Tognetti declared in 2019 that “Bach is God to musicians” (2019, as cited in Sakr, 2019, para. 3).

Yet when looking at the composer’s manuscripts, the claim of a universality to ideals or values is harder to uphold. Bach composed *Soli Deo Gloria* (Glory to God Alone), and not written in the worship of any God, or any Christian God at that, but rather to the God of the evangelical reformed German Lutheran Church. Bach wrote the initials S.D.G. (*Soli Deo Gloria*) at the end of all his sacred compositions, and some of his secular works.¹ His music was written for a particular people group wrestling with their personal and communal faith at a specific point in history, being the congregants at the various churches he ministered (Gardiner, 2013). He wrote for the specific musical forces available to him, which dictated instrumentation and the degree of difficulty of parts and particular timbres of voices and instruments (Rifkin, 2010). Bach’s intentions in composing are therefore tied to his historical context. This is not to limit his agency in his own creativity, but to observe simply that his music reflects the contextual attitudes and

¹ This moniker was taken up by John Eliot Gardiner as the title of his British recording label used to release the albums made during his ‘Bach Cantata pilgrimage’ of 2000. In stark contrast to this moniker, the pilgrimage displayed an unashamed shift to the music of Bach becoming less Christian and far more Universalist. This is shown foremost in the chosen album covers of the records displaying a range of striking images of minority people groups from across the world, covering a range of ethnicities, gender, age and religions.

values that accompanied his life. At its most basic level, his music served a specific worship purpose to the God he revered.

There is a duality in the perception of Bach that has been problematic, due to, as Harry White (2017, p. 94) notes, the “dual obligation to represent Bach as an agent of historical narrative and as a harbinger of German musical sovereignty”. This calls for a divided allegiance between his self-evident mastery of musical genres and the ideological underpinning of his music, particularly vocal church music, a division that leads Richard Taruskin (2004, para. 30) to call Bach a “Janus-faced” composer.

Richard Taruskin in his essay ‘A Beethoven Season’ notes the folly of this universalism, quoting French scientist Stanley Hoffman’s definition of this position, “there are universal values, and they happen to be mine” (Hoffmann, 1993, cited in Taruskin, 2008b, p.75). Taruskin argues its hypocrisy, “like utopianism and ethnocentrism, universalism normalises, excludes, and shouts down. If ‘universal’ does not mean universally accepted, then it means nothing...’universal’ comes to represent an ever-shrinking, ever more laughably isolated coterie.” (2008b, p. 75-76).

How, then, can Bach be ‘universal’ when, as contemporary performers, we exist in a context completely foreign to that of Bach? Bach provides an answer in his reworking of Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* (1736) in his cantata *Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden*, BWV 1083 (Bach, 1748). Bach’s musical parody of Pergolesi’s work only slightly expands the orchestral material and completely replaces the *Stabat Mater* text with that of Psalm 51. Bach and Pergolesi existed in historical and musical contexts of significant division and animosity. Pergolesi wrote for a Catholic Neapolitan confraternity, following the Marian text of the *Stabat Mater* sequence depicting Christ’s mother suffering during the crucifixion (Paymer & Williams, 1989). For Bach, a key reformation tenant was a move against Marian worship by the church, and so the Lutheran church would not have

accepted the text of this work at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig (Aston, 2002). Bach's use of Psalm 51, core to the Lutheran doctrine of justification, as an alternate text affirms his own beliefs.

Martin Luther said of Psalm 51 himself:

Knowledge of this psalm is necessary and useful in many ways. It contains instruction about the chief parts of our religion, about repentance, sin, grace, and justification, as well as about the worship we ought to render to God. These are divine and heavenly doctrines. (Luther, 1532/1955, p. 303)

This parody by Bach makes it clear that changing a composer's original context is not a twentieth-century invention but was uncontroversial and commonplace. Bach inserts his own contextual ideals and priorities, being of reformed Christianity, in the reworking and performance of Pergolesi's work. There are often strong views that music and text have a sacred bond that should not be broken, where even the translation of vocal music into other languages was often considered "barbarous" according to Dent (1935, p. 1). Yet, Bach's regular reworking of the music of his arias and choruses throughout other works (Stauffer, 2018), often with vastly different textual themes, reveals a far more flexible relationship between text and music.

The context of a work refers to the external factors that influence both the author and the audience of a text. Changing the composition's original context and subsequent insertion of contemporary cultural ideals in performance is not recent. However, its prevalence and criticism have been increasingly public and widespread. This burgeoning criticism is perhaps due to the inherent realities of changing tastes and fashions. As time passes, the cultural divide widens and the insertion of contemporary values becomes more noticeable and seemingly more incongruent with the composer's original context (Mah, 2018).

One of the most prominent recent examples of this practice of reinterpretation is *Regietheater*. Translating to ‘director’s theatre’, in it, the stage director takes on a role equal to that of the composer rather than subservient to the composer in interpretation. However, this practice of enacting change on a work, commonly in opera, has received considerable hostility. Heather MacDonald writes in *The Abduction of Opera* that *Regietheater* is “one of the most depressing artistic developments of our time; it suggests a culture that cannot tolerate its legacy of beauty and nobility” (MacDonald, 2007, para. 7). Yet this practice of co-authorship mirrors the practice of Bach in his reappropriation of Pergolesi’s work for his context – *Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden*, BWV 1083 is a co-authorship between Bach and Pergolesi.

The criticism towards *Regietheater* often operates selectively and only after crossing some imaginary threshold of reinterpretation. Few critics will argue with the removal of Bach’s cantatas from their liturgical context into the concert hall, despite clearly changing the purpose and effect of the work. Nor will they bat an eyelid when a female soprano rather than a boy treble sings *Zerfließe, mein Herz* from Bach’s *St. John Passion* (1724). Yet the dramatic stagings of Bach’s Passions is often met with significant resistance, arguably a far more seismic shift in concept (Varwig, 2014). However, arguably the greatest shift in the reception history of the work occurred just under two hundred years ago, in Mendelssohn and Zelter’s revival of the work, with its transplantation out of liturgical sacred venues and into the secular world.

This change in performance practice of the *St. Matthew Passion* did not result from a gradual movement away from this music being performed in a liturgical context. Rather, because of the work’s disappearance from musical life for a hundred years, its revival was in a foreign context and so brings with distinctive contextual baggage from that seen in its inception. The manuscript of the *St. Matthew Passion* was not lost, but rather the work was neglected due to its difficulty for both audiences and performers in duration, themes and the changing tastes of musical culture.

The conductor of Berlin *Singakademie* and Mendelssohn's teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter, at first actively tried to dissuade Mendelssohn from performing the work, seeing it as a task too large for the young composer (Applegate, 2005).

Zelter relented, and a performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* was held on 11 March 1829; the first performance to occur after Bach's death. Commentary on this revival tends to focus on the drastic changes that Mendelssohn made, particularly in the omission of arias, recitatives and chorales, as well as the substitution of instruments. Yet arguably more momentous, was that the performance did not occur in the context of a church service during *Vespergottesdienst* (Vespers on Good Friday), rather, it was held as a public concert by the Singakademie Berlin at the Maxim Gorki Theatre (Applegate, 2005). The broken lineage of the work's performance history and new context within an "imaginary museum of musical works" (Goehr, 1992, p. 8), allowed for this drastic re-interpretation. Other liturgical works, such as Victoria's *Tenebrae Responsories for Holy Week* (1585), remained tightly bound with the liturgical context for many years.

The performance reflected the cultural and musical mores of Mendelssohn. Conducting from a piano, not a harpsichord, he introduced nineteenth-century instruments such as clarinets, replacing the oboe d'amore and oboe da caccia. Concerned with the length of the work, he substantially shortened it, cutting ten arias and six chorales. By removing movements, Mendelssohn worked to compress and focus in on the drama within the biblical text, as well as heighten the emotional weight that accompanies the story (Sposato, 2005). This emotional concentration moves away from the baroque notion of affects, which saw music as having the power to evoke a spectrum of specific emotions within the listener according to Hall (2017) and into the passions of the romantic period according to Haynes (2007). Mendelssohn's careful markings, particularly of the *turba* (crowd) choruses, seek to make the dramatic height of the crowd more pointed, that they are real people of "flesh and blood" (Winkler, 2009, para. 26).

Highly contrasting dynamic markings and accents exaggerate the dramatic intensity of the opening chorus, whilst Bach's autograph contains no indication of dynamic, tempo or accents. See for comparison the start of the opening chorus, with the Bärenreiter edition of Bach's original (1727), and the recently published Bärenreiter edition of Mendelssohn's performance (Bach & Mendelssohn, 1829).

3

Passio D. N. J. C. secundum Matthaeum

1. Chorus

The score is for the first chorus of the Passion of Jesus Christ according to Matthew, BWV 244, by Johann Sebastian Bach. The score is in G major, 12/8 time, and consists of 5 measures. The first measure is a whole rest for the Soprano in ripieno. The other instruments enter in the second measure with a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The organ and continuo provide a steady bass line with figured bass notation.

NBA II/5

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Bach, J. S. (1725). Matthäus-Passion BWV 244 (Bärenreiter, Ed.) [Score].

Passions-Musik nach dem Evangelisten Matthäus ERSTER TEIL

1. Chorus mit Choral

Johann Sebastian Bach

Bearbeitung von / Arrangement by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

The musical score is divided into two main sections: **Coro I** and **Coro II**.
Coro I includes:
 - Soprano ripieno / Clarinetto I/II (resting)
 - Flauto I / Oboe I (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Flauto II / Oboe II (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Violino I (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Violino II (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Viola (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Soprano, Alto, Tenore, Basso (resting)
Coro II includes:
 - Flauto I / Oboe I / [Clarinetto I] (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Flauto II / Oboe II / [Clarinetto II] (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Violino I (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Violino II (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Viola (starts with *mf*, then *cresc.*)
 - Soprano, Alto, Tenore, Basso (resting)
 - [Fagotto II] (starts with *mf*)
 - [Fagotto I] / Violoncello e Contrabbasso (starts with *mf*, then *simile*, then *cresc.*)

BA 11308

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Bach, J. S., & Mendelssohn, F. (1829). St. Matthew Passion BWV 244 Arranged by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy Berlin 1829 and Leipzig 1841 (Bärenreiter, Ed.) [Score].

Thus we see that both Bach and Mendelssohn had no compunctions about reinterpreting a composition's context and inserting their own contemporary cultural ideals: Bach for Pergolesi and Mendelssohn for Bach. Yet in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly in the historically informed performance (HIP) movement, there was a return to viewing the composer's context as sacred and perfect. Paul Hindemith wrote in the 1950s:

We can be sure that Bach was thoroughly content with the means of expression at hand in voices and instruments, and if we want to perform his music according to his intentions we ought to restore the conditions of performance of that time (Hindemith, 1950, cited in Harnoncourt, 1988, pp. 111-112).

Richard Taruskin famously linked the HIP and modernist movements together, being both reactions against the Romantic era's emphasis on personal expression, instead prioritising historical accuracy and perceived authenticity in the performance of music (Taruskin, 2008b).

Particularly in the 1950s onwards, there was significant research into the context that Bach operated within. Research of eighteenth-century instruments informed instrument builders about how best to recreate instruments of the period, and we discovered far more about vocal forces and singing techniques through treatises and personal correspondence from Bach to his contemporaries. As these discoveries were made, recordings and performances increasingly reflected the historical context of Bach's time (Kenyon, 2018).

Yet as we progress through the twenty-first century, after the initial boom of historical performance research, the discovery of new material from Bach's time has slowed considerably. Performers are therefore met with the challenge of how to interpret these works in new and meaningful ways. Taruskin in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (2008b) presents a

live and virile view of music, not as a universal language or an inherently positive force, but rather a product of culture and politics that can be both dangerous and powerful. He critiques the idea of music as a transcendent art form that is above politics, arguing that music is always embedded in social and political contexts.

‘Early music’, though its pretension to ‘authenticity’ is easily refuted, is nonetheless a profoundly authentic expression of our time – for better or worse. That, rather than its pretensions, is what gives it its vitality, and why its present project of encroachment on later repertoires is destined to continue and succeed (Taruskin, 2008b, pp. 16-17).

Taruskin first outlined this assertion in *Text and Act* (Taruskin, 1995), arguing that the goal is to sculpt the work with a greater understanding of its author’s contextual environment. In the same way that Bach and Mendelssohn revived and reappropriated works, performers now similarly insert their own cultural and contemporary ideals into their art. This underscores a key argument made by Taruskin on the purpose of musicians, particularly that our primary task is not to act as museum curators, serving only to academically reconstruct past worlds. Rather, that as music is a living and transformative entity that interacts and communicates with people in different ways across time, the job of musicians should be to embrace this changing relationship and to see this as being a unique and an often-inspiring reflection of its power.

An increasingly popular medium in which this is being played out is in the staging of Bach’s Passions. Directors of these productions argue that the Passions of Bach contain deep revelations of the human experience, that evoke a response regardless of any personal religious belief. The public atheist and director Sir Jonathan Miller said of the universal themes in the *Passions*, “it is something that is permanently there whether you believe it at all, which is the fact

that we are here to suffer, and that our profession in the world is that we are here to die” (Miller, 1997, 43:22).

By studying the *Passions* of Bach, we place in front of us a mirror used to expose cultural and contextual ideals and values, and how these timeless human experiences are expressed differently by different generations. This study explores the consequences of Taruskin’s assertion that the interpretation of music expresses the cultural priorities of the performer, and assess how the staged *Passions* of Bach reflect and reveal the cultural experience and values of the time. The extra-musical elements in the staged realisation of the *Passions*, where directors have made bold interpretative choices, combined with the rich and deep themes of humanity in Bach’s music, provide insight into the unique cultural moment that they exist.

This study looks at a proposed mechanism by which this reflection of context it is achieved, being through *Regietheater*. *Regietheater* fosters a creative process where the director and composer are seen as equal collaborators, each bringing their unique context and vision to enrich the performance. Rather than one overshadowing the other, their perspectives interact dynamically, offering audiences a multifaceted interpretation of the work. By straying so radically from the original context of Bach, the directors have a defined purpose in seeking how this music can speak into the unique cultural moment that they exist. Having two authorities working simultaneously (in this case Bach and the director) it is not possible for both sides to compromise or respect the other, in contemporary staging.

Many Bach scholars and leading musicians treat these stagings of Bach with suspicion and contempt. Gardiner writes:

While many of us might rejoice at the passion of the old oratorio rituals as the cracking of a great ice floe of misplaced reverence, I see no overwhelming advantage – nor any inherent need – to define and localise the dramatic essence of Bach’s *Passions* by staging them as proxy operas. On the contrary, the moment the drama is freighted with extraneous aesthetic baggage, it risks being flattened out and the music ends up diminished as a result. It is the intense concentration of drama within the music and the colossal imaginative force that Bach brings to bear in his *Passions* that make them the equal of the greatest staged dramas: their power lies in what they leave unspoken (Gardiner, 2013, p. 433).

The “extraneous aesthetic baggage” that is assigned to modern stagings assumes not only a shallowness of directorial purpose, but also that the purpose is primarily to enhance the imaginative force of Bach. There is truth in Gardiner’s assertion, where the co-authorship assumed by directors in the staging of Bach’s Passion does inherently flatten out Bach’s original composition – to place something extra onto the music will mean that something is lost in the process. As such, this would be a foolish exercise should the goal of the director be to complete or enhance Bach’s music.

However, there is a lofty goal at play, one that desires to create something *new* not *better*. An aspect of the director’s purpose is to take the music and ‘direct’ the eyes and ears of the audience towards a particular focus. In the same way that a music director achieves this purpose sonically, a stage director uses both visual and musical tools to achieve this intent. Through co-authorship by a director, they seek to use Bach’s music as a vehicle in which to pursue a new objective. If we consider, as I will examine, that music is a living entity that does not exist in a vacuum of time but rather interacts with and inspires people since its creation, then artists should be encouraged to take bold interpretative steps in engaging with this living work. The stagings of Bach’s *Passions*

are indeed bold interpretative steps, and precisely because of this, they clearly reveal how the work connects with the artist in their world. This paper studies how this new objective is linked directly to the context of the director, interpreting music of the past through personal, lived experiences.

Michel Foucault's concept of the "author-function" adds further nuance to this discussion, suggesting that the author is not simply a person who writes a text but a construct that governs the interpretations and expectations of the text. In Foucault's essay *What Is an Author?* (1979), Foucault argues that the author is a function of discourse rather than the singular source of meaning within a text. This function serves as a mechanism that influences how texts are consumed, limiting or guiding the interpretation based on the assumed authority of the author. The author's identity and the context they inhabited impact the way the text is framed, read and valued.

When applied to *Regietheater*, especially in a co-authorship model, the author-function becomes more fluid. As in *Regietheater* directors often reimagine canonical works, significantly altering the original text's meaning through restaging. This approach shifts the focus from the playwright to the director, who assumes a co-authorship role. Directors in *Regietheater* are therefore not just interpreters but creators who intervene in the text, infusing their own political, social and aesthetic interpretations. As such, the author-function can apply to both the original playwright or composer and the director, creating a shared or contested space of authorship. The director's interpretation may challenge the authority of the playwright, moving away from a literalist reading into a figurative reading shaped by contemporary concerns.

This co-authorship model adopted by *Regietheater* directors embodies what Foucault describes as the shifting nature of the author-function, where multiple agents (such as director,

choreographer, musicians) participate in the creation and interpretation of meaning. The text becomes a space of collaboration and debate, where authorship becomes increasingly fluid in modern theatre practice. As such, the goal is not to be overly prescriptive when identifying authors. In a performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, for instance, one could argue for an almost infinite list of contributors: not only the librettist Picander, but also each musician in the orchestra, or even God, given the use of Biblical texts. Instead, this highlights the fluid and collaborative nature of co-authorship in *Regietheater*, where a few key creatives emerge as recognised co-authors amid this collective process.

The practical outworking of this study looks at extending these principles through the creation of a narrative film set to the cantatas of Bach, and utilises contemporary dance in storytelling. Where *Regietheater* presents dual authority, here authority rests equally on multiple shoulders, principally – the original author and composer JS Bach, the artistic musical director, the film writer-director, and the choreographer. This highly collaborative process reveals not only challenges made in the power of each authority, but also the storytelling and emotive tools that are unlocked through this interdisciplinary collaborative process. The friction, development and methodology in the creative process are imbued with the personal context of the artists involved, showing how this music can speak powerfully in different ways to different people across time.

The three authorities that lead this story-telling of the cantatas of Bach are Film Director and Writer Lachlan MacMahon, Choreographer Omer Backley-Astrachan, and myself serving as the Music Director, as well as the overall Artistic Director of the project. Each of these creatives bring in specific and unique skills that manifest in their interpretation of Bach's music as they assume co-authorship.

The central cantata to the film, Bach's *Mein Herzze schwimmt im Blut*, BWV 199 (1714), in Bach's context, tells a dramatic first-person journey of a woman initially feeling as a "monster in the eyes of God" to feeling loved and accepted as a child of God. This context is transformed in the film to an exploration of neurological disorders and its manifestation in the mind of the film's protagonist. The writer-director's personal experience with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and the lead dancer, Jana Castillo's experience with tourettes, dystonia and autism, has been fed into the narrative interpretation of this cantata by Bach.

1.1 People are Dirt

Richard Taruskin's *Text and Act* (1995) compares the restoration of paintings to that of the modernist historical performance movement. Art restoration is a process where centuries of dust and other aging elements are removed to reveal the artist's original context. Taruskin notes two critical facets in making this comparison. The first is that the restoration process is not objective, meaning that "what is 'stripped' and what is 'bared' are acts and both are interpretations" (Taruskin, 1995, p. 150).

The second is that the dirt that has accumulated on these works are the lived experience and responses to a work by artists and audiences that have gradually amounted since the work's inception. This may be the smoke from the fireplace in which the painting hung above, that the owner's family would gather around each Christmas to admire. Taruskin states:

What is thought of as the 'dirt' when musicians speak of restoring a piece of music is what people, acting out an infinite variety of motives over the years, have done with it. What is thought of as the 'painting' by such musicians is an imaginary rendering in which

‘personal choices’ have been ‘reduc[ed] to a minimum’ and, ideally, eliminated (Taruskin, 1995, p. 150).

The significance of this built-up grime is regularly dismissed; in many respects, it is the documentation of artists’ responses to a work. This built-up dirt is how musicians have responded to a work in a particular way. This accumulated dust and grime are what Taruskin would see as ‘authentic’ (with deliberate use of scare quotes) as it is the unedited and genuine response of performers to a work in their time. Taruskin, therefore, underlines the danger of the modernist historical performance movement. At its core, it can operate under the belief that “people are dirt”, and this dirt must be removed so that we can see the work in its true and original glory (Taruskin, 1995, p. 150).

Taruskin’s goal is not to do away with the historical performance practice movement; instead, the goal is liberation.

Only when we know something about the sources of our contemporary practices and beliefs, when we know something about the reasons why we do as we do and think as we think, and when we are aware of alternatives can we in any sense claim to be free in our choice of action and creed, and responsible for it (Taruskin, 1995, p. 19).

In other words, the goal is to extend the possibilities of what can be removed and what can be added, to mould the work with knowledge of its author’s intentions and the experience of the artist performing. Lydia Goehr, in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992, p. 103), discusses the idea that the “work-concept” is a historical and cultural phenomenon that changed performance practice. Once a fluid and malleable relationship between performer and composer, it transitioned to one of more strict and immovable boundaries in which the performer was

increasingly encouraged to honour the intentions of the composer (Goehr, 1992). It is not to say that either situation is more desirable; however, this brings forward the discussion of the hierarchy of authority and, more importantly, the complex and ever-changing dance between the authority of a work's author and its reciter. Taruskin discusses how often this dialogue between the composer and performer is addressed in adversarial and hierarchical terms, where “performers are essentially corrupters-deviants, in fact. Composers and their musicological champions are the preservers of abiding values” (Taruskin, 1995, p. 13). However, the interpretation of music is a living practice that is fluid and moving; new musicians encounter and respond to works in new ways resulting from the unique circumstances of their time.

On 23 and 25 December 1989, just over a month after the Berlin Wall had fallen, Leonard Bernstein conducted two performances of Beethoven's Symphony No.9, one concert in what was West Berlin and the other in what was East Germany, featuring musicians from around the world as well as from both sides of Germany. Bernstein made one change, directing the choir to sing the text “Freiheit” (freedom) instead of “Freude” (joy), making the work an “Ode to Freedom” (Spredemann, 1989). Of course, the explicit alteration of such well-known music does not conform to the ideal designated by Beethoven. However, this ‘corruption’ spoke true and to the heart of the recently reconciled nation of Germany, who joined together to sing this “Ode to Freedom” on giant five-by-ten meter screens across the freed city of Berlin. One resident stated, “Given the current situation here, nothing could be more appropriate than changing the text. It's a gesture that fits in perfectly with the current times” (Todd, 2017, para. 4).

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century there was kindled interest in historically-informed performance. However, the uncovering of new information is quickly diminishing, so performers must confront new ways to develop and respond to this music (Haynes, 2007).

Taruskin is particularly assertive in his opinions of the static, and what he sees as uninspired,

nature of musicians who only look to the past, willingly emotionally and musically castrating themselves from having a personal connection to the music.

Do we really want to talk about ‘authenticity’ any more? I had hoped a consensus was forming that to use the word in connection with the performance of music – and especially to define a particular style, manner, or philosophy of performance – is neither description nor critique, but commercial propaganda, the stock-in-trade of press agents and promoters.

...If you construe your fragmentary evidence the way religious fundamentalists construe scripture – that is, if you believe that what is not permitted is prohibited – then you will find yourself in the position of the Early Music performer who happily averred that, when making records... ‘I personally try to restrain all the people who work with me...I think it’s best to be minimal about your additions,’ lest the recording ‘embarrass us for another twenty years.’

There is logic in this position, but it is the logic of certain death. There is nothing you can do, after all, and be sure that someone will not say, ‘Hey, you can’t do that!’ If you want no one to say it, you must do nothing – as many do in the name of ‘authenticity.’ Such an authenticity is worthy neither of the name nor of serious discussion. (Taruskin, 1995, pp. 90-91)

Taruskin critiques the way authenticity is often appealed in early music performance, arguing that it has become a commercial label rather than a meaningful concept. This challenges the essentialist notion of a singular, correct way to perform historical music. Similarly, social constructionism rejects the notion of a singular, absolute or verifiable truth about identity or

culture. Both perspectives argue that what is considered authentic is shaped by social, historical, and cultural realities, and cannot therefore be pronounced as absolute.

Moreover, Taruskin's critique of performers who stifle creativity out of fear of violating the notion of authenticity parallels intersectionality's argument for multiplicity. Intersectionality views identities as complex and overlapping, where rigid definitions often fail to capture this complexity. In performance, similarly, embracing fluidity and creativity—rather than adhering to a restrictive notion of authenticity—allows for a fuller, more dynamic expression of music.

As such, being empowered to have freedom in the choice of the interpretation of this music, we begin to see a reflection of the cultural and personal environment within which the performer and audience exist. Greater knowledge and understanding of historical performance practice is of huge benefit in unlocking greater possibilities of reading and realising a musical text, yet isolating interpretation to just these understandings creates significant limitations to performance.

This tension was verbalised by Stravinsky who began to refer to performers as executants rather than interpreters.

Music should be transmitted and not interpreted...an executant's talent lies precisely in his faculty for seeing what is actually in the score, and certainly not in a determination to find there what he would like to find. (Stravinsky, 1936, p. 74)

These tensions between executant and interpreter are especially evident in the *Passions* of J. S. Bach. As outlined at the beginning of this study, there is a commonly held view of Bach as a saintly figure – one that is omniscient and perfectly complete. Yet whilst the physical notes written are rarely questioned, the Christian subject matter that formed the core of his sacred

works has been fixated as a point of aggressive contention in society ever since its inception.

What is essentially the same text has been interpreted in vastly different ways by different churches and groups, and one must look no further than just before Bach's time in the Reformation.

It is perhaps the perfect storm for heated discord—not only is it a faith system that forms the basis of the Western world in building governments, hospitals, families, and law and order, but also in bigotry, imperialism, greed, racism, power, and abuse. Whilst the increasing secularisation of society has seen a departure from this foundation, its remnants still remain—one only has to look at the title of hospitals (St Vincent's, Sydney Adventist Hospital) or each President of the United States being sworn in on a Bible. John Dickson (Dickson et al., 2019) in *For the Love of God: How the Church is better and worse than you ever imagined* studies this phenomenon specifically. Perhaps more influential is that reformed Christianity's focus is not limited to societal sanctification, but is primarily concerned with the soul of the individual, and speaks to inner personal trials, emotions and self-identity. This discussion paired with the music of Bach ironically places Bach as a sentient perfect being, yet the Christian god as the instigator of varying opposition. It is perhaps this tension that provides an opening for an interpreter to assume co-authority with its author.

The staging of Bach's *Passions*, therefore, provides a perfect test case for Taruskin's assertion that post-modernist performance practices are those that respond to contemporary ideals. How performers and directors have responded to Bach's presentations of the Passion of Christ—for better or worse, to recall Gardiner's critique—reflects the cultural environment of the time and place, whether through a strong Christian belief, a Universalist application, or even more specific issues such as the role of women and prisoners.

1.2 The Bias of Restoration

Taruskin's analogy of art restoration shows similarities to historical performance practice, where the choice of what to leave and what to change is a subjective decision made by the artist and informed by their predilections as guided by their knowledge (Taruskin, 1995). However, the inherent limitation in historical performance practice is that we do not have exact knowledge of how a work was performed, resulting in a vast spectrum of informed possibilities that the artist can select. As such, the selection of what to include or omit is made so according to the personal context in the intentions or constraints of the artist performing the work. This selection can take various forms in the music of Bach, from the selection of instruments in a continuo section (harpsichord, organ, cello, bassoon or theorbo) or, more contentiously, to the number of singers per part in Bach's choral works.

Where there is no objectively correct performance practice in this field, rather a spectrum of possibilities, the artist has to carve a path informed by a historical understanding of the work and in response to their intentions or personal reactions to it. This choice of what to reveal and what to keep hidden is an expression of Gestalt psychology known as the figure-ground relationship (Koffka, 1935). According to the Gestalt principles, the human mind segments our visual world into figure and ground. The figure is the object that focuses on the visual field, and the ground is the background. As a result, our perception can change significantly depending on what we place in the figure and ground. This principle is most famously known in Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin's (1915) bi-stable (or reversing) two-dimensional forms, most notably the vase.

Throughout this process, the integrity of the work is maintained; however, levers are pulled by the artist so that the audience may see the work in a particular way.

Taruskin argues that even those who, as Stravinsky would identify as “executants” as opposed to “interpreters”, must to some extent make subjective choices in performing (Stravinsky, 1936, p. 74). Extending on his analogy of art restoration, the choice of what to leave is a subjective decision made by the restorer and informed and guided by their knowledge. This is no exact science, and there is an inherent impossibility in having a complete and perfect understanding of how the work was originally presented. As such the restorer, or rather performer, begins to trace a journey through a maze, where while each choice is aided by their knowledge, there is subjective agency in the route they take.

If exact replication cannot then be the goal, Bruce Haynes (2007, p. 226) presents a slightly more nuanced proposal, that “our ultimate concern is trying to approach historical performing” and that in this pursuit is where we discover authenticity that is fulfilling.

In striving for Authenticity [sic], we are creating something of our own, modern through and through. Moreover, something impossible to achieve, incidentally, by continuing to use received tradition. With time, Authenticity has found its most valuable role as a paradigm, and idea and an inspiration that may or may not exist. It is not the realisation of Authenticity that is important to us as musicians; it is instead the pursuit of it (Haynes, 2007, p. 227).

In the case of staging the *Passions* of Bach, we are dealing with a significant diversion from the original context. Instead of focusing on relatively small decisions such as choosing between gut or steel strings, or the number of singers per part, incorporating an extra-musical element into the staging of a work, that was not originally intended to be, has far greater consequences. The choices and consequences of the artists’ decisions are magnified, and so their bias or personal context that they insert into the work is often far more evident.

The effects of time have greatly increased the number of choices available when performing the music of Bach. Yet the dramatic staging of the *Passions* goes a step further in a seismic deviation from Bach's original context. As such, the choices are far more explicit and deliberate, revealing the agenda of the artist. It is for this reason that the stagings of the *Passions* of Bach throughout the last century provide a substantial test of Taruskin's assertion, determining what the artist has chosen to 'reveal', what they have chosen to 'hide', and how this reflects the values of our constantly shifting culture.

In order to elucidate the process by which these re-interpretations of the music of Bach take place, I turn now to a discussion of the history of *Regietheater*. Although not conventionally linked with the music of Bach, this study reveals how the techniques and process employed by stage directors in the reinterpreting of traditional works parallel those utilised by directors staging Bach's *Passions*—or indeed any other work not explicitly conceived by composer or librettist to be staged. Historically, *Regietheater* directors have utilised several essential interpretative tools. A historical examination of the development of these tools facilitates their adaptive application to various staged productions of Bach's *Passions*. Furthermore, there are clear similarities between *Regietheater* and the frequent adaptation of plays and novels to film (Lev, 2017). The interpretative style and techniques of the *Regietheater* movement are applied in the creation of the film *Mein Herz schwimmt*. In this film, the director, choreographer, and musicians collaboratively interpret Bach's music, each assuming co-authorship in the creative process. The nature of this process of co-authorship and its link to *Regietheater* within the film are discussed in the accompanying commentary.

2. *Regietheater*: Reinterpretation and Restoration

Regietheater is a German term that describes a production in which the director radically reinterprets the composer or librettist's original context by reimagining the work, often in a contemporary context. Within *Regietheater*, the director assumes the role comparable to an *auteur*. Here, the director implants such highly subjective and centralised control over a work that they serve to rank together with its creator.

The word *Regietheater* is a compounding of two German nouns: *Regie* (director) and *theatre*. The grouping of these two words outlines that the *regie* is equally vital to the music and text. The interest surrounding *Regietheater*, therefore, concerns the interplay and relationship between these two elements. Here the director may seek to dominate the music and text or to support, deconstruct, or transform these elements. Artists and audiences are often split in their support of this method, with traditionalists in favour of the literal version of music and text, and progressives who prefer the interpretative approach of *Regietheater*. Unfortunately, the sparring between each side has caused the term *Regietheater* to become so problematic, mainly where audiences are far less sympathetic to directors or have strong feelings for the music and text of a work. Opera critic Lynn René Bayley presents an example of this colourful and problematic exchange.

Sometimes I really do think that these people with their Advanced Edumacation, sitting around in their palatial estates hammering out this crapola on their keyboards, need to have their heads examined as much as the psychotics who mount these idiotic productions. (Bayley, 2016, para. 17)

It is important to note the historical genesis and development of *Regietheater* to understand its true meaning, unclouded by modern opinions. In the early twentieth century, stage directors within Germany became disenfranchised and frustrated with a bourgeois theatre that presented traditional and Romantic staging and acting (Müller, 2015). Directors sought to break away from the tradition of theatre as escapism and to explore more complex, socially relevant, or avant-garde forms of performance. Initially starting with dramas and then moving to opera, this transition in directing style aligned with significant developments in lighting, revolving stagings, and cyclodrama. Cyclodrama is a sizeable concave curtain that encloses a stage to form a background; they are often used to create the illusion of a sky onstage and are usually illuminated (Bertenshaw, 2023). They mainly focused on productions that incorporated abstract and symbolic imagery, most notably with directors such as Otto Klemperer, Gustav Mahler, Hans Gregor and Max Reinhardt. Reinhardt founded the Salzburg Festival, which soon became a key centre for *Regie* productions.

After World War II the Salzburg Festival became increasingly international, particularly under the direction of Herbert von Karajan. As a result, this festival and the Bayreuth Festival became a hub and testing ground for directorial innovation. From this, Wieland Wagner's work (Bayreuth Festival Director 1951-1966) firmly began what we now see as *Regietheater*. In 1951, brothers Wieland and Wolfgang reopened their grandfather Richard Wagner's Bayreuth Festival. However, due to the shadow that National Socialism and its affiliation cast upon Wagner's operas, they decided to make a clear departure from traditional stagings of the work and moved instead towards highly minimalist stagings.

Substantial analysis has been made of the New Bayreuth Festival and actions taken to achieve its transformation. Carnegie notes:

Wieland and his younger brother Wolfgang, aged thirty-four and thirty-one, respectively, had been entrusted with the reopening of the festival after their mother Winifred had been effectively dispossessed by a denazification court. Over the festival lay the shameful shadow of the Führer's appropriation of it as a cultural flagship for the Reich. [...] When Wieland spoke of the necessity of 'entrümpeln'—of clearing out the rubbish and making a clean start—he was speaking of more than tired old scenery, costumes and stage props (Carnegy et al., 2006, p. 263).

Wieland's productions of Wagner's operas radically reset the understanding of the work. Using empty stagings, intense electronic lighting, and cyclorama, the focus shifted towards the singers. Applying the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud and Rudolf Steiner, particularly looking at *Tiefenpsychologie*, or the science of the unconscious, this served to focus the purpose and philosophy of the Greek myths that were being told, removing them from their German affinities, and de-historicising them (Felsenstein & Melchinger, 1961).

Coinciding with these trends saw a different trajectory in *Regietheater*, with an increasing focus on the acting and drama within an opera, particularly at the Komische Oper Berlin under Walter Felsenstein. Melchinger notes that they almost became actors first and singers second (Felsenstein & Melchinger, 1961). Felsenstein presented all his productions in German so to make them understandable for the audience. Joachim Herz, who took over from Felsenstein at the Komische Oper, coined the term *komödiantischen Realismus* (comic realism), which notes the ability of these productions to transcend time whilst also maintaining hyper-realism (Herz, 1984).

The works of these opera houses and directors set the stage for *Regietheater* as an art form that dominated the Western art world, and became a common method of staging operas. However, the development of *Regietheater* was also met with considerable opposition as directors sought to

apply their interpretations to the operatic canon. The director's apparent desire to claim co-authorship of the work through reinterpretation caused considerable anger and disdain (Keegel, 2022). Yet inherent in *Regietheater* is the exploration of new meanings of work through altering staging and direction, seeking hidden, suppressed or contemporary avenues of interpretation that can be discovered within the work. This aligns with Taruskin's view that music engages with different contexts over time, taking on new meanings and purposes as the context of the original author shifts.

There have been several critical studies into modern *Regietheater*; however, Jürgen Kühnel's helpful categorisation of different types of *Regietheater* is particularly relevant due to its application to all art of this directing style, not specifically opera or plays. Kühnel lists and details four types (Kühnel et al., 2007, pp. 13-30); Symbolic Stagings, Comic-Realism, Diegetic Transpositions and Deconstructivist Stagings. Each category will be discussed both historically and theoretically to examine the parallels between *Regietheater* and the staging of sacred music, specifically the music of J.S. Bach.

David Levin (2007) presents an alternative approach to interpreting and staging operas, particularly focusing on how productions balance literal and figurative readings, as well as weak and strong readings. Literal readings involve staging the opera in close alignment with the original libretto and score, prioritising a faithful representation of the historical, cultural, and textual contexts intended by the composer or librettist. In contrast, figurative readings allow for more interpretative and symbolic approaches, going beyond what is explicitly written to explore deeper themes within the work. These interpretations may involve re-contextualising the opera into a different world, a concept Kühnel describes as diegetic transposition, or even completely reinterpreting character motivations and themes to address contemporary issues.

Weak readings typically adhere to traditional, conservative stagings of opera. While they may be faithful to the text's literal elements, they do not significantly challenge or reinterpret the material. According to Levin, weak readings "embrace the prevailing understanding of the work's meaning, seeking to reproduce the work's prevailing aesthetic identity, and often presenting itself as a nonreading... merely seeks to present the work in its most familiar form" (Levin, 2008, pp. 45-46).

In contrast, strong readings involve bold, sometimes radical reinterpretations of the opera, aiming to unsettle established conventions. These interpretations often provoke the audience to reconsider the opera's themes or meanings through figurative, non-literal stagings. Strong readings may diverge significantly from traditional approaches, introducing new thematic, political, or psychological dimensions that were not explicitly present in the original work.

Levin argues that strong, figurative readings have the potential to unsettle the opera, encouraging audiences to engage with the work in fresh and provocative ways. The categories established by Kühnel provide a useful framework for understanding how stagings of sacred music, particularly Bach's works, exemplify *Regietheater* practices. However, many productions do not neatly fit into Kühnel's binary categories; instead, they often combine elements of deconstruction, diegetic transposition, theme-based, and comic realism, as seen in Chéreau-Boulez's *Centenary Ring Cycle*, which will be discussed later. In these instances, Levin's framework for analysing *Regietheater* can provide valuable insights into a director's creative process and intentions.

2.1 The Symbolic Stagings of Wieland Wagner

Symbolic staging of theatre will often look to reduce scenery to symbols of the psychological and physical action in the libretto, these stagings are also known as theoretical conceptions. Wieland's

preferred strategy of *Entrümpelung* (stripping away, cleaning up) saw the deployment of basic geometric shapes at the centrepiece for the set design of his opera productions (Liebing, 2017). In later productions, he sought to incorporate other visual influences into his productions, “notably Brecht (for 1963 *Meistersinger*), Jackson Pollock and Picasso (for the 1951 *Parsifal*) and what he defined as ‘primitive’ artists such as Australian painter Sidney Nolan in his 1965 *Ring*” (Ashman, 2008, p. 254). The singers’ movement was almost non-existent; however, the in-built rotating stage meant that the opera’s dramatic confrontations occurred either at great distances between singers or very close, almost nose-to-nose (Ashman, 2008).

Wieland Wagner’s symbolic stagings focused on capturing the psychological and emotional aspects of the characters and their relationships, rather than relying on elaborate sets or historical accuracy. Working in direct opposition to the comic realism of Joachim Herz, this staging is committed to scenic abstractionism and based on psychoanalysis, myth, deep psychology, as well as post-structuralist concepts and self-reference (Ridley, 2012). The mode is derived from the Marxist theory of history and society, and the psychoanalysis theories of Freud, CG Jung and Adler. By stripping away excessive details, the staging aims to distil the essence of the work and engage the audience on a deeper, more emotional level.



Das Rheingold directed by Wieland Wagner in the 1952 Bayreuth Festival

Wagner emphasized the inner conflicts and tensions present in the opera, using symbolic gestures, movements, and visual elements to convey these themes (Brown, 2016). Through his staging choices, he aimed to make the audience connect with the universal and timeless aspects of the opera's narrative. Wagner sought to create a synthesis of various art forms, such as music, drama, visuals, and stage design, to convey the essence of the operatic work (Brown, 2016). He believed that the staging should enhance and illuminate the themes and ideas present in the music and libretto, rather than merely providing a literal representation of the story.

Wieland presents theoretical approaches on which the staging conceptions are based, and so there is a rejection of the traditional logocentric cohesiveness of a work of art.

When opera directors impose their modern context onto the historical works of Wagner, they remove the work from Wagner's context and draw focus onto certain themes and values, either inherent in the original story, or inserted according to the director's values. Often, as a result of the inherent, abstract nature of *Regietheater*, the contemporary context imposed by an opera director envelops the work, seizing the original story and generates a new narrative. This is no more evident than in Wieland Wagner's use of Freud, Jung and Adler theories in his staging – three psychotherapists whose theories were entrenched in pop-culture in the mid-twentieth century (Ridley, 2012).

2.2 The 'Comic-Realism' Stagings of Walter Felsenstein

Comic-Realism, defined by Kühnel as the second category of *Regietheater* (Kühnel et al., 2007), is distinguished by the concentration on "the veracity and verisimilitude of the libretti as equals to the music, in order to bring out the authentic significance of the work" (Senelick, 2017, p. 272). The effect was that performers would become foremost actors and then singers. Felsenstein would present all operas in German, regardless of their original language, which meant that the

story and drama of the work had real immediacy to the audience. A significant influence on Felsenstein was Max Reinhardt and his reinterpretation of *Die Fledermaus* from three acts into twelve episodes that more readily reflect the story told in the libretti for the audience (Senelick, 2017).

Felsenstein's concept of comic-realism aimed to create productions that combined elements of both comedy and realism, with a focus on enhancing the dramatic impact and emotional engagement of the audience (Müller, 2015). He believed that opera should be accessible and relevant to contemporary audiences, and his approach sought to bridge the gap between the opera stage and everyday life.

One of the key principles of Felsenstein's comic-realism approach was to portray characters as relatable and believable individuals with genuine emotions and motivations. The stagings emphasise characters' psychological depth and complexity, exploring their inner lives and human vulnerabilities (Senelick, 2017). This realistic portrayal helped the audience connect with the characters on an emotional level, enabling them to empathise with their experiences.

Felsenstein justified this new approach in an article published through the *Komische Oper*:

The effect is to be produced by fantasy and musical wit, not meretricious pseudo-romanticism and smutty substitutes for humour, which characterise so many products of the modern salon operetta. We want music that arises from the dramatic situation, not as stimulation, song as intensified, urgent expression, not as hits and interpolations. In short, we shall seek over time to bring the most precious works of classical, exuberant musical theatre up to the level of interpretation and effect that it originally had and still potentially has. (Felsenstein, 1965, pp. 9-10)

From the premise that *Musiktheater* is theatre first and music second, Felsenstein and his assistant Joachim Herz's process in reinterpreting these works was through a philological reading of scores and libretti (Herz, 1984). Through this approach to understanding the structure, historical development and nature of the language, and by studying variants of the work, they were able to arrive at what they defined as the Urtext and create translations that prioritised the work's drama and theatre.

This process of opera interpretation led to the term comic-realism being established through Felsenstein's successor Joachim Herz (Senelick, 2017). It can be characterised as a connection between the tradition of realistic music theatre and the anti-illusionist theatre of Bertolt Brecht (Brockmann, 2021). Brecht's anti-illusionist theatre aimed to promote critical thinking and engage the audience as active participants in discussions about societal issues. At the same time, he encouraged spectators to maintain a degree of distance to effectively analyse the social and political issues presented on stage. The use of tools such as *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation or defamiliarization) and breaking the fourth wall, aimed to prevent the audience from becoming too emotionally involved in the characters and plot (Silberman, 2021).

This type of theatre interpretation builds upon the scenic naturalism of Stanislavski, whereby it becomes realistic because it exposes the tangible moments of social reality in the work but with scenic means (Williams, 2012). Whereas Stanislavski, working after the Russian Revolution, viewed theatre as a means to explore human experience, focusing on emotional authenticity and character depth; Brecht, who was active during the rise of fascism in Germany, extended theatre as a tool for social change and political engagement, emphasising critical awareness and questioning societal norms. Opera, much like sacred music, often presents narratives that are distant from contemporary audiences, whether they involve Norse mythology, ancient Israel, or

foreign belief systems. The staging of comic realism prioritised accessibility to the audience, and in doing so “presented tales of timeless meaning and significance” (Müller, 2015, p. 586).

2.3 Diegetic Transposition

In Kühnel’s paper, he identifies the director’s choice to change the period of a play or opera period as a diegetic transformation, which then requires pragmatic transformation. These terms were first used in Gérard Genette’s book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997), which centres around a discussion on the relationships that texts may have with prior texts.

Genette’s concept of diegetic transposition is a term used in narrative theory to describe the process of transforming a narrative from one medium or mode of representation to another (Genette, 1997). Diegesis refers to the spatiotemporal world in which the events of a narrative occur. Transposition, in this context, refers to the adaptation or translation of a narrative from one context to another.

Genette emphasises that diegetic transposition involves more than simply reproducing the events of the story in a different form (Genette, 1997). It involves a creative interpretation and adaptation of the narrative elements to suit the specific affordances and constraints of the new context.

In the process of diegetic transposition, various aspects of the narrative can be transformed, including the characters, settings, plot structure, dialogue, and even the perspective or point of view. The transposition may involve changes in the temporal or spatial dimensions, alterations in the narrative voice or focalisation, and modifications in the presentation of the story’s events.

A study of diegetic transposition looks at what Genette identifies as the hypotext and the hypertext. A hypotext is an earlier text that serves as the source material for a subsequent piece of literature, referred to as the hypertext (Saunders, 2017). An understanding of both texts provides greater insight as there is always an agenda in the transposition of one to another, or as Genette states, “no transformation is innocent” (Genette, 1997, p. 317). Genette concludes that what is concerned in these works is “transposition that is openly thematic” (Genette, 1997, p. 277), that the agenda of the transposition is seen through similar and contrasting themes, and whilst it is possible to read a text with no understanding of the themes transposed from the *hypotext*, such a reading would nevertheless be incomplete. Alternatively, in this form of *Regietheater*, a face-value viewing of the hypertext is insufficient for a complete understanding of the effect and purpose of the production.

For example, the musical *Rent* can be considered a modern-day adaptation and reimagining of the themes, characters, and plot elements found in Puccini’s opera, *La Bohème*. *Rent* is set in New York City’s East Village during the 1990s, while *La Bohème* takes place in the Latin Quarter of Paris in the 1830s. Despite the temporal and cultural differences, *Rent* captures the spirit and essence of *La Bohème* while adapting it to the contemporary context (Tang, 2009). *Rent* addresses social issues and challenges specific to its time, such as the impact of HIV/AIDS, drug addiction, and gentrification. *La Bohème* explores the romantic ideals of love, friendship, and the struggle of artists in a different socio-cultural context of 19th-century Paris. So, to experience a more complete understanding of the significance and purpose of *Rent*, an understanding of the hypotext that is *La Bohème* is required.

A final key element to diegetic transposition is what Genette terms focalisation, which refers to the perspective through which the events, actions, and experiences in a narrative are perceived, filtered, and presented to the reader or audience. Focalisation determines whose thoughts,

perceptions, and knowledge are accessible and provides a particular lens through which the story is experienced (Abbott, 2020).

Focalisation involves the selection and restriction of narrative information, shaping the reader's understanding and interpretation of the events. It determines what the reader knows, sees, and understands within the narrative world. Focalisation can be attributed to a specific character, an external narrator, or even an impersonal and objective viewpoint.

Genette distinguishes between different types of focalisation:

1. Zero Focalization (Zero Point of View): In this type, the narrative presents events without filtering them through any specific character's perspective. It maintains an objective and distant stance, providing a neutral account of the events.
2. Internal Focalization (Internal Point of View): This type involves presenting events from the perspective of a specific character within the narrative. The reader is granted access to the character's thoughts, perceptions, and experiences, thus immersing them in the character's subjective world.
3. External Focalization (External Point of View): External focalisation occurs when the events are presented from a perspective external to any specific character. The reader or audience is given access to the external observer's viewpoint, which may include descriptions and insights that are not available to the characters.

Focalisation plays a critical role in shaping the reader's engagement with the narrative and influencing their interpretation of the events. It influences the audience's emotional connection to the characters, their understanding of the story's themes and conflicts, and their ability to form judgments and opinions about the events occurring in the narrative.

Genette in his study of focalisation, explores how the narrative perspective and the distribution of knowledge and information within a narrative can have a significant impact on the reader's experience and interpretation of the story (Genette, 1997). A director's use of changing the narrative perspective of a work can profoundly shape the themes and values within the story.

2.4 Deconstructivist Staging

The deconstructivist approach, which became prevalent in late twentieth-century staged dramas, takes the text of a play and reduces it to a fragmented sequence of dispensed parts (Müller, 2015). These fragments are then mixed with fragments of other texts, called association texts, and used to convey the imaginative reflexes of the director.

Traditional operas often evade this process as the musical specifications of the score provide boundaries that restrict the ability for this restaging to occur. These musical specifications form the inherent basic narrative arc of a work, which is rarely completely disregarded in favour of the director's creative impulses. A common example of this is the incorporation of multiple operas together to create a new narrative or thematic connection.

A notable example where this has occurred is *The Tristan Project* (Sellars, 2005). Directed by Peter Sellars, this production combined Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* with excerpts from works by other composers, including Claudio Monteverdi, Jean-Baptiste Lully, and György Ligeti. The production explored themes of love, desire, and transcendence across different historical periods and musical styles. In William Kentridge's *The Coronation of Poppea/Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* (1998), Claudio Monteverdi's operas *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* were combined to create a new storyline. The characters from both operas interacted with each other, and the production highlighted themes of power, desire, and political intrigue.

In cases where the staging does not prescribe to a linear narrative, the story of the opera is contained in the score and libretto of the work. Kühnel notes that this is where Deconstructivist *Regietheater* staging obtains its distinction—it is the tension between the story told by the composer and the story told by the director. Moreover, the texts, in particular the dialogue texts of *Singspiele* opera, offer a specific “scope for shattering” (“Spielräume der Zertrümmerung”) (Kühnel et al., 2007, p. 8).

Kühnel identifies four key features within deconstructivist stagings:

- The fundamental distrust of the “lieto fine” [happy ending] (Kühnel et al., 2007, p. 8)
- The female gaze (seen regularly in Ruth Berghaus’ production of Mozart operas)
- The dissolution of the personal unity of the characters. Hans Neuenfels’s production of *Die Entführung Aus Dem Serail* (1998) doubles the protagonist with a singer and actor, who then interact with each other.
- The dissolution of the unity and inner logic of the plot, as well as the renunciation of the work’s storyline. Instead, a series of linked images are often offered, such as in Hans Neuenfels’ 2000 production of *Così fan tutte*.

2.5 Theatre ‘to’ and ‘for’ the Present

A discussion of the mechanics and theoretical underpinning of these styles of *Regietheater* remains merely theoretical if the purpose of each director is not considered. For directors to engage in innovative artistic choices, such as assuming co-authorship with these significant works of the past—whether in opera, literature, or the music of Bach—this should be done to serve a specific purpose or function. Boenisch (2015) has published significant key works looking at *Regietheater*

and notes two fundamental principles that govern the art form. The first is that the theatre should be a companion to and for the present. The second is that the subjectivity of the work is made by explicitly prioritising a specific point of view, which is projected through the director's framework of social, political, and cultural contexts. The effect of this is that it serves to both universalise and abstract the *mise-en-scène*.

The French term *mise-en-scène* is occasionally used in association with *Regietheater* and often interchangeably (Boenisch, 2015). The term translates to 'setting the stage' but refers to all things seen by the audience (set design, lighting, actors) and serves to differentiate between what is seen and what is heard. However, the historical underpinning of *mise-en-scène* within the French theatre movement means that it has different broader connotations to the German *Regietheater*. *Mise-en-scène* is a broader term that encompasses all elements of staging, including traditional and conservative approaches, while *Regietheater* specifically refers to a more radical and director-driven approach to staging (Pavis & Anderson, 2012).

The antithesis of *Regietheater* is *Werktreue* (or *Originalklang*), which means 'faithfulness to the work' and the author's intent (even if this is invariably interpreted) (Toh, 2023). It is often used in the discussion of *Regietheater*, as in parallel with the rise in the *Regie* movement has also become increasingly the expectation of musical *Werktreue*, particularly in the context of historically-informed performance. For example, it would be less common to perform Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* with the forces of Mendelssohn's revival of the work with substantial cuts and altered instrumentation. However, within an operatic context, the historical accuracy of staging receives a lower priority to producers and festival directors than other musical elements (period instruments, Urtext editions and the like). An example of this was how Nikolaus Harnoncourt, a pivotal figure in the *Originalklang* movement, was involved in *Regietheater* productions of Mozart at the Salzburg festival (Thompson, 2009).

Despite the substantial research conducted into *Regietheater* and its use within operas and plays, there has been no notable research looking at the application and influence of *Regietheater* in staged performances of sacred music. This phenomenon parallels the rise of *Regietheater*. In Australia in recent years, there have been several significant *Regietheater* productions of sacred music; the 2013 Opera Queensland staging of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* directed by Lindy Hume; the 2017 Australian Brandenburg Orchestra staging of Handel's *Messiah* directed by Constantine Costi; and the 2020 Adelaide Festival staging of Mozart's *Requiem* directed by Romeo Castellucci to name a few. The staging of sacred music inherently utilises *Regietheater*, as the director radically alters the original context for which the work was composed through the staging of the work.

The cause of the lack of investigation of *Regietheater* and the staging of sacred music may be due to the strong negative connotations now attached to the *Regietheater*, or the lack of research investigating the connection between the staging of sacred music and *Regietheater*. Academics deliberately choose not to frame their discussion of the staging of sacred music in terms of *Regietheater* so that the reader can engage more objectively in their analysis. Varwig in *Beware the Lamb: Staging Bach's Passions* (2014), looks more broadly at the performance practice development of staging Bach's *Passions*. By tracking the development of stagings, she explores how they transform to become politically or aesthetically relevant. Through the immediacy of staging, audiences are confronted with the violence of the crucifixion and the spiritual weight of the *Passions*. Varwig, in this study, briefly addresses *Regietheater* in the context of the negative consequences of staging Bach's *Passions*, stating:

Such a response remains focused on how far a production might damage or overshadow a work, assuming an antagonistic relationship between the two in the manner of

Regietheater, where the pieces are transplanted into alien environments through radical updating. (Varwig, 2014, p. 262)

Although Varwig does not prescribe a label to most stagings of the *Passions*, she reveals how every staging of a liturgical work is, by its very nature, a work of *Regietheater*. These works, which were explicitly only intended to be performed in a liturgical context, have been radically reinterpreted through this change. This could apply to any performance of the *St. John Passion* without the precise liturgical surroundings as Bach intended (for example, in an unstaged concert hall setting). However, looking more broadly than Varwig's study, the point of defining *Regietheater* is not to be overly prescriptive but rather to highlight how the staging of sacred music, and in the case of this study, the *Passions* of Bach, overwhelmingly shows them to be examples of *Regietheater*.

Despite the increasing frequency of Bach's *Passions* stagings and the regular reviews of these productions, there has been limited examination of these stagings as part of a growing movement. The most common research in this area focuses on the reception history of staged *Passions* and general hermeneutics and interpretation of Bach's music. Varwig's analysis of the reception history of the staging reveals the evolving dialogue between the works and different audiences across time. In what John Butt describes as a search for a quality of "meaningfulness" (Butt, 2010b, p. 19) in a progressing dialogue of the *Passions*, Varwig concludes that presence and meaning "thus emerge not as mutually exclusive but mutually enabling categories" (Varwig, 2014, p. 270). In addition, Varwig also critically assesses the effectiveness of staging Bach, noting an example with the staging of the *St. John Passion* by the English National Opera, where the final scene included a live lamb being presented to the Evangelist, only to have it bleat loudly until the end. More importantly than this, Varwig emphasises the reality that Bach's *Passions* are not operas.

There have also been several studies on the trends of interpretation of Bach in contemporary Germany. For instance, Baumgartner, in his study of contemporary Bach interpretation, highlights the importance of understanding the theological foundations of the religious texts in Bach's music.

While Bach interpreters need not be of the Lutheran faith, they must be aware of, and be able to relate to, the religious dimension in Bach's music...A serious interpreter of Bach's music must seek to understand the implications of these words (*Soli Deo Gloria*), which – for Bach – were apparently no mere slogan. (Baumgartner, 2002, p. 49)

Alan Maddox (2017) looks at how the performative nature of the *St. Matthew Passion*, when staged or realised in a way different from the work's original context, allows for specific ideas to be emphasised and expressed more than others, creating new and evolving meanings of the work.

There has been substantial research and analysis of the reception of the 2010 Sellars' staging of the *St. Matthew Passion*. Notably Susan McClary's (2019) book *The Passions of Peter Sellars: Staging the Music*, who looks at the concept of ritualisation, a term coined by Peter Sellars, that describes the secular presentation of Christian work as a quasi-religious ritual. Sellars staging argues that when Bach's *Passions* are separated from their liturgical context, they are drained of their power, liveliness, and originally-intended medium. As such, Sellars seeks to reincorporate liturgy into his staging through ritualisation, where liturgy is ritual. This allows the audience to engage with the performance as a religious service instead of entertainment, whereby he reconnects Bach's work to its sacred purpose.

However, within each discussion of the staging of Bach's *Passions*, opinions become almost entirely reactionary, not looking at the formation process and purpose of each staging. The omission of the influence of *Regietheater* in the inception and purpose of these productions results in a missing puzzle piece in understanding how each production has been influenced by its context. The link between *Regietheater* and these stagings is evident for several reasons. First, the development of *Regietheater* as an art form in opera and plays throughout the twentieth century parallels the growth and development of the staging of Bach's *Passions*. Second, most directors who engage in the staging of Bach are self-identified *Regie* directors. But most significantly, as discussed, the stagings of sacred music are inherently *Regietheater*; they are a piece of theatre where the composer's context has been radically changed through the restaging of the work. Here the director assumes co-authority to Bach through the insertion of extra-musical elements. It is the interplay between these two authorities and the elements they provide that reflect the context of their time.

Seen in this way, *Regietheater* provides greater clarity to our understanding of how contemporary cultural context infuses contemporary theatrical production. By employing these perspectives, we can more easily identify and understand the relationship between the hypertext and hypotext, and what elements of the original work the director is attempting to alter or suppress, and for what more significant purpose.

The stagings of Bach's *Passions* most commonly utilise diegetic transposition and theoretical conceptions, although not exclusively, and by doing so are used to reflect the contextual values of the director. This discussion of *Regietheater* and the various methods and tools directors use in their reimagining, will be used to frame an analysis of staged *Passions*. To quote Genette again, "no transformation is innocent" (Genette, 1997, p. 317), and it is the work of this study to

forensically analyse two significant stagings of Bach's *Passions* to reveal their pre-meditated intent and how that reflects their contemporary and cultural ideals.

The subsequent two chapters delve deeper into two of Kühnel's categories of *Regietheater*: Theoretical Conceptions and Diegetic Transposition. These categories are particularly relevant to two significant productions of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*: Jonathan Miller's staging in 1993, and Peter Sellars' in 2010. A comprehensive understanding of the intricate processes involved in reinterpreting each staging provides valuable insight into the director's intent behind their production.

2.6 Theoretical Conceptions

The staging of theoretical conception in *Regietheater*, focuses on exploring themes and theoretical concepts that can be expressed through the work (Kühnel et al., 2007). Consequently, the narrative is often placed aside, where the purpose of the work becomes the conception of a particular theory. This has immeasurable opportunities for staging; however, the most common realisation that productions in this category have focused on are the influences of psychoanalysis, post-structuralist, deconstructivist, and feminist theories. Theoretical stagings directly oppose the comic realism initiated by Joachim Herz, where the narrative is prioritised.

Arguably, the conception and development of theme-based *Regietheater* centres upon the operas of Wagner, in particular *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. When brothers Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner managed the Bayreuth Festival, the twenty-five years that followed was, as Michael Ewans labels, "a period of cleansing" (Ewans, 2014, p. 26). During this period, the stigma that followed

Wagner's operas due to their use in Nazi propaganda began to wane, and the *Ring* was soon viewed as archetypal, symbolic and mythical (Carnegy et al., 2006).

Whilst the *Passions* of Bach are not haunted by as dark a past, how does the explicit Christian purpose within the *Passions* influences directors if they choose to stage the work (Varwig, 2014)? As the directors of the *Ring* sought to separate the work from its sinister Nazi roots, this theme-based mode of *Regietheater* is a way in which directors look to dislocate the *Passions* from their Christian roots. Consequently, this category of *Regietheater* implies a rejection of the traditional logocentrism and cohesiveness of a work of art.

So, to understand the methodology used within theme-based restagings and to examine parallels in the stagings of Bach's *Passions*, the following analysis will focus on three significant theme-based stagings of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. At first, I will identify the theme(s) that the director is seeking to conceive in the production, followed by a brief discussion on how this is then achieved and its implications for the cohesiveness of the work. Finally, I will discuss the three productions; Wieland Wagner's 1951 Bayreuth staging, Patrice Chéreau's Centenary 1976 staging, and Klaus Zehlelein's 1999 Stuttgart staging.

2.6.1 Wieland Wagner's 1951 Bayreuth Production

Wieland's innovation in his productions of *Parsifal* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen* saw psychological-archetypal, abstract stagings become an epoch for theatre stages in the decades that followed. As Hilda Brown notes, "The first cycle had presented an 'internalized', psychoanalytically orientated Jungian mythological approach, complemented by minimalist, subtly illuminated abstract sets and an austere stylization reminiscent of Greek tragedy" (Brown, 2016, p. 204). For Wieland Wagner, the use of abstract and theory-based stagings began from necessity, where he and the

Bayreuth Festival needed to show a clear departure from the traditional stagings of his grandfather. As such, the theory Wieland placed at the centre of his production was Depth Psychology, the process of bringing our unconscious human experience into a concrete living reality (Ridley, 2012).

The depth psychology purpose in the production led to minimalist staging and saw a prioritisation of the musical score, where the consistent and self-referential music becomes a language of itself (Ridley, 2012). In defence of sparse staging, Wieland said about Astrid Varnay, the leading Wagnerian soprano of the twentieth century, “Why do I need a tree onstage, when I have Astrid Varnay?” (Wagner, 1955, as cited in Moravcsik, 2008, p. 144). As a result, the stage was stripped to its bare minimum, with extensive lighting effects on the minimalist areas and a cyclodrama on three sides of the stage.

The symbolic staging of theatre will often look to reduce scenery to symbols of the psychological and physical action in the libretto (Millington, 2006). Wieland’s preferred strategy of *Entriimpelung* saw the deployment of basic geometric shapes at the centrepiece for the set design of his opera productions (Brown, 2016). In later productions, he sought to incorporate other visual influences, notably Pollock and Picasso (for the 1951 *Parsifal*) and “primitive artists like the Australian painter Sidney Nolan (for the 1965 *Ring*)” (Ashman, 2008, p. 254). Even though singers remained largely stationary, the in-built rotating stage meant that the opera’s dramatic confrontations occurred at great distances between singers or nose-to-nose.

2.6.2 Patrice Chéreau’s 1976 Bayreuth Centenary Production

For the *Ring*’s centenary, Patrice Chéreau’s production’s purpose was a social critique. Set in the Industrial Revolution (Brown, 2016b), its purpose was described as “a thoughtful allegory of

man's exploitation of natural resources" (Wise, 2013). With this theory underpinning and driving the restaging, Chéreau drew upon the often-dismissed interpretation of the work made by the great Anglo-Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw to illuminate this theoretical conception (Chéreau, 1980).

Shaw interprets the work as an allegory for the collapse of capitalism due to its inherent contradictions. Proponents argue that this Marxist interpretation reflects Wagner's early days as a left-wing socialist revolutionary when he conceived and began writing the opera's libretto. In his essay *Die Kunst und die Revolution* [Art and Revolution], Wagner discussed his thoughts on the relationship between art and society. Writing the essay after his exile due to his participation in the Dresden Revolution of 1849, he was unable to have his operas produced, so he spent his time writing his concerns about the nature of opera as music drama as well as the libretti for the *Ring* cycle (Wagner, 1849). Shaw linked these early writings of Wagner to the *Ring* and argued that they were a socio-political allegory, writing that *Das Rheingold* is a place which:

Is waiting for Man to redeem it from the lame and cramped government of the gods. Once grasp that the allegory is simple enough. Really, of course, the dwarfs, giants and gods are dramatisations of the three main orders of men: the wit, the instinctive, predatory lustful greedy people; the patient, toiling, respectful, money-worshipping people; and the intellectual, moral, talented people who devise and administer States and Churches. History shows us only one order higher than the highest of these: namely, the order of Heroes. (Shaw, 1898, p. 24)

The validity of Shaw's argument is not essential for this discussion, but rather how this theory of the *Ring*, being a diagnosis of the inherent dysfunctionality of capitalism, is translated into Chéreau's production.

Shaw's Marxist proposition evoked for Chéreau the Industrial Revolution to be used as an allegory (Brown, 2016b). Using this theory as the driving force behind the production, Chéreau drastically changed the depiction of key characters to conform to this purpose. Notably, the relationship between Wotan and Siegfried is used to depict the relationship between the modern state (Wotan) and the apparent naivety and ignorance of the revolution (Siegfried). Chéreau stated, "What distinguishes my direction from the other production: Siegfried can no longer be the shining hero, he is no longer Siegfried-Bakunin like Bernard Shaw referred to him as an immature youth, unfinished and paralysed by ignorance of himself and the world." (Chéreau, 1980, p. 420). In a practical sense, Siegfried is presented wearing a torn sweater and rags and displays narcissistic and evil behaviour towards Mime. Despite Mime's clear manipulation of Siegfried, the audience's view of him is always clouded by his self-centred behaviour. In *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried is now in a tuxedo, indicative of his absorption into the modern industrial state (despite their ignorance of this reality).

More broadly, Shaw's allegorical assignment of characters is adopted by Chéreau. The toiling and money-worshipping giants are depicted as nineteenth-century peasants by Chéreau, the greedy Nibelung dwarves controversially depicted as money-focused Jews, and the gods as the aristocracy of the period. Here the assignment of characters is used to enhance the theory driving the production rather than primarily as a narrative device. Focusing specifically on the depiction of the dwarves as Jews, Chéreau writes: "Incidentally, like many others, I believe that Alberich and even more Mime, match Wagner's conception of Jews" (Chéreau, 1980, p. 434). The same themes are further echoed in Adorno's *In Search of Wagner*, writing, "The gold-grabbing, invisible, anonymous, exploitative Alberich, the shoulder-shrugging, loquacious Mime, overflowing with self-praise and spite, the impotent intellectual critic Hanslick-Beckmesser-all the rejects of Wagner's works are caricatures of Jews." (Adorno, 2005, pp. 12-13). The racist implications of

these caricatures enhance the allegory of the production, where the audience becomes more gripped by the connotations of the characters than the characters' precise actions within the staging. Through this, we see that the staging elements are used to serve the theory that drives the production. Chéreau's commitment to this radical theoretical conception was expressed by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, writing about Chéreau:

In 1980, he told us that he regrets the overly Marxist image of the forge of Siegfried powered by electricity, and if he kept it, it was so as not to have the air of giving in under vituperations of the old guard: 'I will make them swallow the iconoclastic to the end' (Petit, 2016, p. 14).

Yet throughout the opera, Chéreau portrays Mime and Alberich with unusual sympathy, particularly noting the cruelty of Siegfried to Mime, and the Rhinemaidens as vindictive prostitutes who physically mistreat and sexually taunt Alberich, driving him to intense anger.

Chéreau's direction emphasises the humanity of the *Ring's* villains, using Wagner's own operas-without altering a word or a note-to criticise the spirit of both the composer's personal anti-Semitism and the social norms of his day. Through this act, he highlights the malice with which the gods, representing the German bourgeois, treat both the oppressed Nibelung working-class and the stand-in Jewish characters. (Raz, 2011, p.100)

In Chéreau's production, whilst the narrative arc of the opera remains, it is subservient to the theory expressed by the director.

Yet, the theoretical conception behind Chéreau's staging is by no means limited to just a theory. Alexander Rothe (2015) argues that Chéreau and the production's conductor Boulez, both

approach Wagner's work as a platform for introspection into their personal encounters and context with the 1968 student protest movement (*1968 Protests*, n.d.). Both artists express discomfort with revolutionary actions, mirroring the escalating unease in both West Germany and France regarding the radical left.

Both Chéreau and Boulez had vastly conflicting views of Wagner. Where Chéreau sees Wagner as a revolutionary thinker, commenting on and challenging the power dynamics of the state; Boulez disregards the political dimensions of Wagner's life and creations entirely, directing attention, as Rothe notes, to the progressive attributes of the music, resisting any efforts of political appropriation (Rothe, 2015). Yet despite these significant differences, they are united in a shared context of the production, with Rothe analysing how the Bayreuth centennial *Ring* unfolded against the backdrop of ongoing historical discussions on interpreting the events of 1968, influencing both the conception and reception of the cycle.

2.6.3 Zehelein's 1999 Stuttgart *Ring*

One of the most convincing examples of Regietheater utilising theoretical conceptions is the work of Artistic Director Klaus Zehelein, particularly in his critically acclaimed production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* at the Stuttgart Opera in 1999. Zehelein's production completely deconstructs the narrative unity of the cycle through his choice to use a different director for each opera (Moravcsik, 2008). Whilst the staging was under the general management of Klaus Zehelein, the then-intendant of the Stuttgart Opera, the four directors engaged in this production were; Joachim Schlömer (*Das Rheingold*), Christoph Nel (*Die Walküre*), Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito (*Siegfried*) and Herbert Wernicke (*Götterdämmerung*). Although Zehelein does not direct any specific opera himself, his selection of four directors—each with their unique styles—allows him to function as the overall director of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

When asked why he made this decision, Zehelein argued that “any effort to impose a unified concept or meaning on the *Ring* cycle (Totalitätsanspruch) restricts the director’s creative freedom and is thus ‘totalitarian’” (Zehelein, 2000). Zehelein believed that the usual requirements of musical leitmotifs, overarching ideas and narrative, within the *Ring* encumber and constrain directors. This production treats each opera as a series of disconnected episodes, where the directors can interpret their designation opera within the *Ring* without “prior assumptions or obligations” (Moravcsik, 2008, p. 132). As such, Zehelein seeks to fragment and deconstruct the complete opera, working to shift focus from narrative integrity to a thematic purpose that is unique to each opera.

The deconstructivist vision for Zehelein’s restaging is driven by the tensions that animate Wagner’s opera. Zehelein, in his discussion of the production, speaks of the tension between Wagner’s desire for monumentalization and his need for spontaneity or a life-like quality to his works (Zehelein, 2000). David Levin highlights the tension between Wagner’s obsession with the Bayreuth museum, which he used to glorify himself, and Wagner’s stated wish for the *Ring* to be performed only once before the score was destroyed in flames (Levin, 2008).

Andrew Moravcsik (2008), in a review of Zehelein’s production, sheds light on the deconstructivist process of multiple directors, expounding on the theoretical concepts on which the production is based. Moravcsik interestingly notes the surprising coherence of the production despite its intentions otherwise. He argues that the staging of theoretical conceptions provides unity to the otherwise deconstructed production. Stating, “it is more enlightening to ask what philosophical doctrine lends coherence to this production. The answer is a postmodern literary theory with a dollop of psychoanalytical Marxism.” (Moravcsik, 2008, p. 133).

Moravcsik elaborates that to articulate the deconstructionist vision of the production, being “all that remains is an endless universal struggle for power and autonomy” (Moravcsik, 2008, p. 133). This theory drives the production to be aesthetically and philosophically fragmented, where autonomy and coherence are no longer recognised or acknowledged. Zehelein works to expose the internal contradictions within the *Ring*, where acts of nobility, love and self-sacrifice are shown to result from “material coercion and psychological compulsion” (Moravcsik, 2008, p. 134). The goal here, as Moravcsik notes, is “the ostensible aspiration to achieve a distinct fusion of contemporary banality and moral ambivalence in which every character is treated evenhandedly as an amoral human within a modern everyday setting. Thus the relevance of the *Ring* would be restored.” (Moravcsik, 2008, p. 134).

More specifically, this theoretical conception can be seen through the humanisation of the villains and characters of evil within the work (Mime, Alberich, and Hagen). In *Götterdämmerung*, we begin to empathise with Hagen; who usually is the ultimate villain of the production; here, we see him motivated to fulfil his destiny by avenging his father for the theft of his ring. Furthermore, Hagen is inspired by his love towards his dying father, so his evil act of murdering Siegfried becomes almost understandable. Whilst this humanisation of evil may undermine the traditional narrative of the opera, it reveals the theoretical purpose of the director in placing these acts of evil as part of the everyday human experience.

2.6.4 The Ring Cycle to Bach

Wieland Wagner, Chéreau and Zehelein’s *Regietheater* productions see a particular theory underpinning the restaging of Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*. In the case of Wieland Wagner, the depth psychology theme translates into a highly minimalist staging where the character’s inner thoughts come to the fore. Chéreau’s use of the opera as a social critique of humanity during the Industrial

Revolution transforms the *Ring* into an allegory, where the characters become caricatures, almost bluntly forcing this social theory. Finally, Zehelein's deconstructivist production conveys a sense of universality in humanity's struggle for power.

Despite being narrative in structure, directors have staged Bach's *Passions* using this same method of theoretical conception seen in this type of *Regietheater*. Where the theory conceives the whole production, directors have used theories or theologies ranging from traditional Lutheran Christianity to Universalism. Similar to the three Wagner productions discussed, directors who stage the *Passions* employ similar methodologies in conveying their chosen theory. This ranges from highly minimalist staging used to convey inner thoughts, characters in the *Passion* used allegorically, or removal of the narrative within the work. By seeing the stagings of the *Passions* as using similar processes to traditional *Regietheater* of this type, the theories underpinning these staged productions can be more easily identified, as is the insertion of contemporary and contextual ideals.

The other key comparison to note is the similarity in purpose. Both the *Ring Cycle* and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* have explicit themes set by each work's author, and many directors have sought to radically distance themselves from these themes. Theoretical conceptual stagings work effectively to strip back and reset the themes of a work, where a new and radically different purpose can be applied. This is in contrast to diegetic transposition, where there is a limit to change as the narrative and themes are only transposed to another diegesis, rather than completely reset. Peter Sellars' staging of *St. Matthew Passion* incorporates theoretical concepts akin to the discussed *Ring Cycle* productions. Sellars emphasizes the roles of women and marginalized groups in his staging, reflecting the context he is operating within. Chapter 7 will explore these theories, their parallels to *Regietheater*, and their presentation within the production.

2.7 Genette's *Palimpsests*

The second key category of *Regietheater* is diegetic transposition, which whilst often used interchangeably with thematic transposition, is the mechanism by which the thematic change occurs (Badley et al., 2020). In works of art centred on Christian themes, directors have consistently focused on how Christ is depicted throughout the history of this staging style. Thematic transposition requires two transformational devices; diegetic transposition (that is described as a change in the diegesis) and pragmatic transposition (“modification of the events and actions in the plot”) (Genette, 1997, p. 294). The distinctions here at first appear confusing, as often diegesis is seen itself as the actions within the plot. However, the basis of Gerard Genette’s distinction in his book *Palimpsests* (1997), rests upon the definition of the adjective *diegetic*, which he defines as “in current usage, *diegesis* is the spatiotemporal world designated by the narrative” (Genette, 1997, pp. 294-295). The phrase “spatiotemporal world” is of particular significance, as it means that these transpositions occur by the disassociation of the action and the spatiotemporal world. Alternatively, this change in diegesis is the transposition of the same action in another world or time.

Spatiotemporal changes, whether from ancient Rome to Cold War Russia, result in implicit changes to the plot’s action. For example, Leopold Bloom in Joyce’s *Ulysses* cannot behave in every way similar to Homer’s *Odysseus*, requiring pragmatic changes. As such, there is a necessity for pragmatic transformation that occurs within diegetic transposition. Finally, the spatiotemporal world can be seen in several ways, not only through geographical and historical settings but also through social class and status changes (Genette, 1997, p. 304).

Genette further distinguishes between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic transformations. The distinguishing attributes between each are not overly prescriptive, but helpfully, even in these

broad categories, most transformations fall neatly into one of the two. Heterodiegetic occurs when the transformation makes it impossible to preserve more than the basic outline of the plot (Genette, 1997, p. 297). For example, if the plot of King Arthur is transformed into a modern corporate world, where the Knights of the Round Table become the Board of Directors in a company, and King Arthur is the CEO. Here, the plot's basic premise may remain; however, much beyond this is no longer possible. Examples of this type of transformation has been seen in the 2006 Paris Opera production of *Don Giovanni* by Krzysztof Warlikowski, where the figure of Don Giovanni is detached from his traditional portrayal as a charming libertine and instead framed as an aging, self-destructive man; as well as Peter Sellars 1996 Glyndebourne Festival production of *Theodora*, which transforms the Christian martyr story into a contemporary exploration of political repression and sacrifice.

Alternatively, homodiegetic transformations are seen by Genette as transformations of classical tragedies that conform to the historical or mythological genres (Genette, 1997, pp. 296-297). Whilst other themes may change significantly due to the transformation, there is faithfulness to the preserved historical or tragedy genres. A critical exponent of homodiegetic transformation was Jean Cocteau, who used this type of transformation in his writings on the Greek myth of Oedipus in his play *La Machine Infernale* and a contraction of the myth seen in writing the libretto for Igor Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus rex* (Genette, 1997, p. 257).

A key flagpost of homodiegetic transformation is the preservation of characters' names from the *hypotext*, which extends further into retaining the character's gender, nationality, and often period (Genette, 1997, p. 297). Looking particularly at *La Machine Infernale*, Stephen Holden states in a 1990 New York Times review that "the playwright and director [Cocteau] lifted characters familiar from Greek tragedy off their pedestals and wittily humanised them while remaining true to Sophocles' plot. Instead of a tragic hero, Oedipus is a cocky, virginal youth whose arrogance is

matched by his colossal naiveté” (Holden, 1990). Here, the historical tragedy genre remains intact, yet the themes of the *hypotext* are subverted and altered. Examples of homodiegetic transformations have included Deborah Warner’s 2010 production of *Billy Budd* for the Glyndebourne Festival where the opera is framed from the memory of Captain Vere, and Willy Decker’s *La traviata* for the 2005 Salzburg Festival whose minimalist staging is told through the internal experiences of Violetta.

Arguably, changing the sex of certain characters is one of the most common examples of diegetic transformation. However, this is done most notably when the change in sex undermines and actively works against the thematic intent of the *hypotext*. An unusual example of this was done in the 2018 West End revival of Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Company*, which featured changes to the genders of numerous characters, including the lead male role of Bobby being changed to Bobbie, a female role. The work’s themes are highly gendered and centre on the single life of a bachelor with an inability to commit to a steady relationship and the lives of his married friends. The script was approved and influenced for this production by Sondheim himself, and so it becomes an interesting case study where the author of both texts is the same, which questions how and for what purpose the themes have changed (Paulson, 2021).

Diegetic transformation employing a change of nationality, although usually occurring simply as the result of other more intentional transformations, reveals an essential purpose in an author or director’s use of diegetic transposition – a movement of proximization. Proximization occurs where “the hypertext transposes the diegesis of its hypotext to bring it up to date and closer to its own audience” (Genette, 1997, p. 304). The diegetic transposition of the *hypotext* to the *hypertext* places its themes closer to the audience. This is a crucial tenet of *Regietheater* through diegetic transposition, as the purpose “which always consists in moving from the remote to the proximate” (Genette, 1997, p. 304). If the alternative is the case, one must ask, to what end? An

example of this is the model of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, telling the tale of an English castaway. This model became so popular in diegetic transposition of nationality that Johann Gottfried Schnabel, in his Preface for *Die Insel Felsenburg* (1731), coined the term 'robinsonade'. Soon after, there was Joachim Heinrich von Campe's *The German Robinson* (1779) and Johann Wyss's *Swiss Family Robinson* (1813), and it has even extended more recently to America in films such as *Cast Away* (2000) or *The Martian* (2015).

2.7.1 The Proximity of Christ

The transformation of the distant to the close (proximization) through the changing of nationality can also be seen in how Jesus Christ is usually presented as the nationality of the individual artist (House, 2020). One need only look at an artist famous for providing images that were mass reproduced in the twentieth century, Warner Sallman, and his portrait of a Caucasian Jesus titled 'Head of Christ'. In *Being Religious, American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States*, Charles Lippy states:

There is, of course, no physical description of Jesus in the New Testament or in any other surviving early Christian literature. Yet for hundreds of millions, Sallman's depiction has become the basis for their visualisation of Jesus, a Jesus who brings the sacred into the realm of the ordinary. (Lippy, 1994, p. 185)

Perhaps this is due to the historical westernisation of the Biblical narrative, but there is almost always the complete neglect of the Middle Eastern Biblical context seen in the stagings of Bach's *Passions*.

It should be questioned, then, to what degree is *Regietheater* and its use of diegetic transposition used to sideline non-Western elements from narratives within sacred music? A fundamental purpose of Christianity is that this is not a message confined to first-century Palestine, but its themes have universal timeless relevance and significance. The Christ to the first-century Jew has the same personal relationship as the Christ of the twenty-first-century American (Craig, 2000). Perhaps, then, if a change in the nationality of Christ aids this Biblical theme, then it has achieved its purpose.

The extent to which this selection bias is true depends on the purpose of the diegetic transposition. If the intent is to present themes that transcend race, then it is more helpful to alter the nationality of the *hypotext* deliberately. However, it should be considered that there are themes within the Bible that can only be seen when placed inside its Middle Eastern context (Andrews, 2016). A common theological tool used by scholars is Biblical hermeneutics, which focuses on understanding the Biblical context surrounding Bible passages. Unfortunately, many critical elements of the story remain hidden without understanding the context in which the narrative exists.

Using an example of the Last Supper that begins Bach's *Passion* narrative begins with the text:

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered to be crucified.'
(New International Version, 2011, Matthew 26.1-2)

A face-value reading of this text would see Christ telling his disciples that he would die two days after a Jewish festival. However, understanding the Passover's contextual significance reveals far more in what is being said. The Passover commemorated Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt.

In the book of Exodus, the Israelites were instructed by God to paint the blood of a lamb onto their door frames. The plague that killed all firstborn children would pass over houses painted with blood, sparing the firstborn sons from death (Childs, 1974). As such, it is no coincidence that the Last Supper occurs at the Passover, as Jesus has become the Passover sacrificial lamb.

Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 26.27-29)

For the Israelites, the blood of animals was a seal of the covenant between God and His people (Childs, 1974). The blood of Christ has replaced the lamb's blood, which becomes a new seal of a covenant between God and all people. This is why throughout choruses and arias in the *Passion*, there is the repeated reference the Christ as a lamb. Understanding the Biblical context of the narratives places new and layered meaning in its purpose. However, suppose the narrative is diegetically transposed outside of this Biblical context, particularly in the case of Biblical narrative. In that case, the context that gives the narrative its depth and purpose is severed.

Nevertheless, diegetic transposition still allows for new light to be shone onto a work, revealing themes that otherwise remained hidden. First, however, it must be understood what is lost through the transposition in a change in context and how this may severely alter the purpose and themes of the narrative. The benefit of understanding both the *hyper* and *hypotext* is that a viewer can determine what is gained and what is lost through the transposition and the overall effect these missing elements have on the new interpretation.

2.7.2 Heterodiegetic Transposition of Christ

Genette summarises the distinction and consequences of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic transposition by stating:

Heterodiegetic transposition emphasises the thematic analogy between its [the narrative's] plot and that of its hypotext ('my hero is not Robinson, but you will see that he goes through a very similar adventure'); conversely, homodiegetic transposition emphasises its freedom of thematic interpretation ('I am rewriting the story of Robinson after so many others, but let there be no mistake: I am giving it an entirely new meaning'). (Genette, 1997, p. 310)

A diegetic transposition of particular relevance to this broader study into the staged *Passions* of Bach is Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *Christ Recrucified* (1954). It tells the story of a fictional Greek community and its attempt to stage a play of the *Passion of Christ*. The protagonist, Manolios, a lowly shepherd boy, is chosen to play the role of Christ. Through playing this role, he seeks to wholly embody Christian virtues, causing much resentment and anger from his Christian community. The story culminates with Manolios, having assisted refugees who had been abused by the community, getting his throat slit by Father Grigoris, the village priest. Here we see a multilayered diegetic transposition of the *Passion* of Christ, where the embedding of the *Passion hypotext* through the play comes first, and the modernising transposition results from this original transposition; Manolios, as he plays Christ in the play, becomes a modern Christ figure. Furthermore, other characters in the novel serve to enact other biblical characters (Mary Magdalene, Judas, and John the Baptist). This novel was later transformed into an opera by Bohuslav Martinů titled *The Greek Passion*.

Genette's analysis of diegetic transposition focuses on the transposition between two arguably more distinct texts. However, the same strategies and methodologies of transposition can be observed in the restaging of plays, operas, and sacred music. Arguably the most common practice in the restaging of works is done through heterodiegetic transposition. From Luhrmann's mafia set *Romeo + Juliet*, Bartlett Sher's 1920s Art Deco *Rigoletto*, or Jonathan Miller's Twentieth Century Sloane Street *St. Matthew Passion*, the strategy of proximization is used throughout staged works to reengage and bring its themes closer to the audience.

Observing the diegesis change in the stagings of Bach's *Passions* highlights explicitly the insertion of the specific context selected by the director into the work. This, coupled with the intent of proximization, using this framework of *Regietheater* as a lens to assess how directors have sought to transpose the themes of *Passions* to contemporary context.

In the creation of the film *Mein Herz schwimmt*, we sought to similarly engage with diegetic transposition as a means to extend the work out from its explicit religious context. The diegesis shifted from being internal psychological struggles of Christian convictions, to that of a woman's battle with mental illness, specifically obsessive-compulsive disorder. This internal struggle was captured through a surrealist framing of the film, where the audience becomes unaware with what is reality and what is inside the mind of the protagonist. Discussed in the accompanying commentary of the film, the director's personal experience with Pure-O exhibits the employment of proximization, where from the Director view, the more foreign religious themes of the work are exchanged into themes that identify with his own context.

3. Stagings of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*

Having explored the key principles and mechanisms of *Regietheater* and the process of co-authorship, we now turn our attention to how these concepts are applied in the staging of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. In the past century, there has been a growing number of productions of this work—Bettina Varwig (2014) lists fourteen known stagings since 1913, with many more undoubtedly following. This chapter focuses on two notable productions: Jonathan Miller's 1993 staging and Peter Sellars' 2010 production. We will analyse not only the processes of reinterpretation and co-authorship in these productions and how they adhere to *Regietheater* principles, but, more importantly, how the directors' approaches and decisions reflect their individual contexts.



St. Matthew Passion, 2011 production, directed Jonathan Miller, Olivier Theatre London

3.1 Jonathan Miller's Staging of *St. Matthew Passion*

Jonathan Miller's 1993 staging of *St. Matthew Passion* is foremost a staging with the purpose of proximization – bringing the audience inside the work. The original staging, documented in a BBC film production in 1994, features Paul Goodwin conducting, Rufus Müller as the Evangelist, soloists and choir, period orchestra led by Rachael Podger, and audience members, all young and casually dressed, sitting in a circle. A large table sits at the centre, with a glass of wine, bread and an apple on top. We are no longer in first-century Jerusalem.

3.1.1 Spatiotemporal World

Even before the piece begins, it is apparent that a diegetic transposition of Bach's work has occurred, whereby the spatiotemporal world designated by the narrative has shifted. The work has been transposed across two main aspects-time and location, both of which have broader consequences for interpreting this work.

Jonathan Miller, in a 2008 interview, said of the production:

I've always got slightly impatient with the standard format of people dressed in tuxedos standing behind lecterns with a choir obediently ranged behind them...[My staging had] No costumes, I mean, just everyone was in their ordinary clothes and they just sat around in a circle and every now and then they'd get up and act. (Miller, 2008, 1:07)

By having all participants in their casual clothes, Miller transposes the story into the present world of the audience. Stating elsewhere, "I didn't want anyone to look biblical. I didn't want

anyone to look as if they were really representing the people they were playing except in a very provisional way” (Oestreich, 1997, para. 7).

In Miller’s production, the audience becomes indistinguishable from the singers, meaning that they also feel part of and responsible for what occurs throughout the *Passion*. The placement of the audience and musicians further enhances this. Not only is the work performed completely in the round, with the audience surrounding the musicians, but some members of the audience are scattered amongst the chorus and instrumentalists, becoming literally inside the action that occurs in the musical work. Wendy Lesser, in a review of a 2006 revival of Miller’s production of the work notes:

He [Miller] has understood that at its very centre is an evocation of feeling in the bystanders: first, the bystanders at the Crucifixion at the moment when it occurred, and second, by the bystanders we become when we listen to Bach. Miller has brought these two kinds of bystanders together and made them one...In linking us with the people onstage and them with us, he has sliced through time and space, making the faraway legendary, slightly intangible THEN into the visible visceral NOW. (Lesser, 2007, para. 5)

Lesser’s review of the work explicitly shows the effect of diegetic transposition in this production: proximization. In the same sense that *Robinson Crusoe* is brought near through transposition, here we see the events of the *Passion* brought into the relatable, everyday life of the audience. In addition, unlike traditional performances where the soloists are separated from the chorus, they exist and participate from within the chorus—jointly singing chorales and only stepping out for their solos before returning to their seats amongst the crowd.

The chorus role within the *St. Matthew Passion*, apart from the chorales, has the primary dramatic purpose of serving as the crowd who crucify Christ, and so exist mainly as participants in the narrative component of the *Passion*, alongside the Evangelist and Christ. As such, having the chorus dressed as the audience and sitting amongst them, the audience is drawn closer, almost becoming co-conspirators alongside the chorus in the murder of Christ. Throughout the performance, the chorus acts almost independently from each other; some of them stand whilst others sit, wandering across the stage and at rare points all converging together around Christ at the centre (most noticeably in chorus scenes depicting the torturing of Christ). We are not presented with a militaristic choral society all standing at attention for when to sing but an almost indiscriminate collection of onlookers, each taking their turn to spit on the innocent Christ. Wendy Lesser, in her review, notes further that “they seem simultaneously to be performing the role of a character and to be performing as themselves” (Lesser, 2007, para. 8). We see the effect of diegetic transposition, where a character of the past is brought into the present, with its themes and actions so relatable that it is no longer a tale of the past but of recent human experience.

Alongside this, diegetic transposition also brings pragmatic transformation. Whilst the musicians’ clothes could be considered a pragmatic transformation, the only other items used in the staging are a table, a glass of wine, bread, and an apple. These items, excluding the apple, are all explicitly used within the gospel text. The question should then be asked, why are only these items used in the staging, but not any other items that are also explicitly mentioned (thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26.15), vinegar (Matthew 27.48), the crown of thorns (Matthew 27.29), or a cross (Matthew 27.32-44), to name a few)? The answer to this lies in the purpose of pragmatic transformation, a consequence of the diegetic transposition, which reflects this change in the spatiotemporal world. The maintained items are still commonly used today, whilst thirty pieces

and a cross would not. Miller, therefore, identifies and includes the pragmatic similarities and excludes those that are different. This point is articulated by Miller himself, stating:

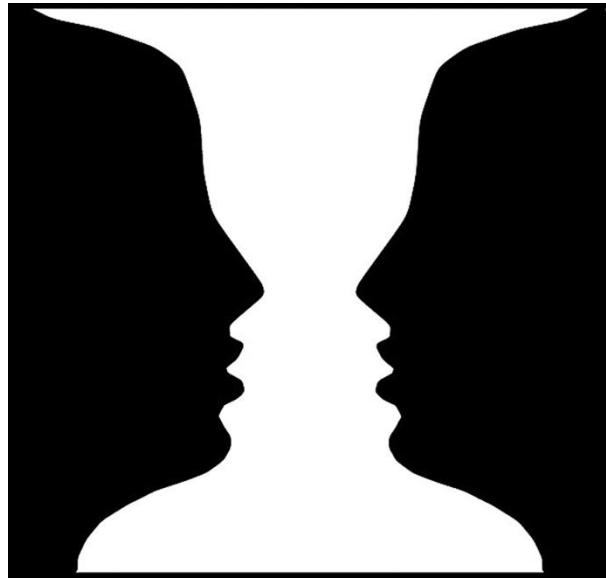
My idea when we first started to stage the work was to present a sort of musical Last Supper, celebrated by the participants. The whole thing would become an informal Eucharist, with the performance as the act of memory that Jesus had in mind when He said, 'Do this in memory of Me.' It may be very odd for a Jewish atheist to be saying this, but it is a sort of musical sacrament, and it becomes a sacrament by participation rather than by simply saying it. (Oestreich, 1997, para. 3)

Miller's concept of presenting the work as a modern-day Eucharist results in specific, pragmatic transformations. As such, there should only be items used in the staging that would be present if a group of Christians were celebrating communion at their homes in the present day.

3.1.2 Figure-Ground Relationship

Miller has stated that his purpose in staging *St. Matthew Passion* was as an expression of Gestalt psychology known as the figure-ground relationship (Miller, 2008). According to Gestalt figure-ground principles, the human mind segments our visual world into figure and ground (Koffka, 1935). The figure is the object that focuses on the visual field, and the ground is the background. Our perception can change significantly depending on what we place in the figure and ground. This is most famously known in the bi-stable (or reversing) two-dimensional forms created by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin (1915), with the vase being the most notable example. Through Miller's process of diegetic transposition, the figure-ground relationship becomes malleable, where he can encourage people to see things they had not previously. Miller states,

“that’s all I ever want to do with works, I want to find a way of doing it which somehow brings them to attend to aspects of it which were previously invisible” (Miller, 2008, 3:56).



Rubin's Vase (Ittelson, 1969)

Miller's staging lends itself towards a heterodiegetic transformation, where whilst the *Passion* narrative is maintained, its staging almost strips the work of its reverential nature. The process of this transposition seeks to make the extraordinary ordinary, whereby bringing the *Passion* story into the every day and pushing away religious icons (namely the physical cross), the theme of the story transforms from being one of divine salvation at a grave cost to a horrific but universally relatable tragedy. Arguably in its original format (the *hypotext*), Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* prioritises the narrative's sacred purpose, with the supernatural significance of the crucifixion being the 'figure'. However, Miller's restaging reveals the characters involved in the *Passion* narrative as no different to you or me, painting a current and relatable human experience.

Almost ironically, by shifting the story away from its historical context in first-century Jerusalem to the present, Miller is, in a way, accentuating the historicity of the characters that surround the

crucifixion of Christ. The characters of Pilate, Peter, and Judas, as well as the chorus and soloists that come out from the chorus, are humanised and shown to be no different from any person in the present. The result is that the audience feels as if they, too, have partaken in the death of Christ, where the story's connection has shifted from being in the distant and reverential to the near, where we, too, would have responded similarly in the execution of Christ.

This relatability of characters in the *Passion* is shown clearly in the aria *Erbarme Dich*, which follows Peter's betrayal of Christ. In Miller's staging, the violin soloist steps out from the ensemble to Peter and plays the solo into his ear as if consoling him in his sadness. The countertenor emerges from the crowd and stands similarly next to Peter's ear facing the violinist. The sorrowful duet serves as a cry of consolation to the weeping Peter. Miller talks of the humanness of Peter's response and the aria that expresses this plea for forgiveness,

...[it is] that moment of knowing that you have forgotten that someone has said something about what you are going to do, that you will betray me, and you have gone through the whole of this ghastly, dishevelled night, and just as was predicted you have gone and done it, and you just beg for some forgiveness. (Miller, 1997, 41:01)

Here, we begin to understand Miller's purpose in his diegetic transposition, which is to convey a universality in the themes expressed in the *Passion*. The process of proximization in diegetic transposition conveys universalism – that the themes of distance are familiar to those of the near. That the emotions, internal challenges and themes faced by first-century Jews are the same as those experienced in the present day. Furthermore, for Miller, these common themes can be separated from Christian belief.

Commenting further on his view on the *St. Matthew Passion*, Miller states in an interview:

It doesn't matter whether you are an atheist or a Jew, by being an educated member of western European civilisation, it is the most famous story there is, it is in your bloodstream, in the way that no other story is. And it happens to be the most intensely dramatic story, you can read it again and again and it never fails as a piece of drama. Now the practicing clergyman would say the reason why it never fails is because it has an eternal truth, and that truth is religious, and you are yielding to it because you are resisting the religious belief which is in you. It is not the case at all, it is something that is permanently there whether you believe it at all, which is the fact that we are here to suffer, and that our profession is the world is that we are here to die (Miller, 1997, 42:41).

Miller argues that the Passion story is so deeply ingrained in Western culture that its significance goes beyond personal religious beliefs. It is part of the shared cultural and intellectual heritage of Western civilization, influencing even those without faith. For Miller, the narrative's strength lies not in religious doctrine but in its dramatic and existential themes, speaking to universal experiences of suffering and death, addressing the fundamental condition of human existence. His staging of the *St Matthew Passion*, using diegetic transposition, underscores this universal interpretation, presenting the story relevant to all people, irrespective of their beliefs or backgrounds.

3.2 Peter Sellars' 2010 Staging of *St. Matthew Passion*

The 2010 staging of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, directed by Peter Sellars, was a landmark production, not only in its staging, but that the work was being brought back into the repertoire of the Berlin Philharmonic. The orchestra had not performed the work in over thirty years; the

last time being in 1981 under the direction of Herbert von Karajan. This performance featured Sir Simon Rattle conducting, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Berlin Rundfunkchor with Simon Halsey as chorusmaster, Mark Padmore as the Evangelist, Christian Herhafer as Christ, and the four soloists Camilla Tilling, Magdalena Kožená, Topi Lehtipuu and Thomas Quasthoff.

In 1993, Jonathan Miller centred his staging of *St. Matthew Passion* on bringing the world of the *Passion* narrative into the present, while Peter Sellars' focus in his 2010 staging prioritises social themes, offering a deeply personal examination of spirituality and social commentary. Many authors have cited his 'adoption' by a group of musicians working at the Emmanuel Church in Boston as pivotal for a young Sellars in considering art as a vehicle for social activism and change.

When you're staging a Mozart opera with a shelter for battered women down the hall, you rethink everything...Every week in a church like that you're having to talk someone down off a bridge and you have to give them several reasons to go on living. And you realise that Bach, Mozart and Handel wrote music for really broken people to help them put the pieces back together. (Battle, 2014, para. 13)

The belief that music of the past can speak profoundly to the themes and issues that face contemporary audiences is at the core of Sellars' productions. This belief is not exclusively in the music of Bach but in his productions of the works of Handel, Mozart, Messiaen and Adams, which, as Susan McClary states, "he does so for precisely the same reasons: to translate traditional cultural texts into terms that speak to contemporary audiences and the moral dilemmas they face on a daily basis" (2019, pp. 183-184). Sellars' staging reorients the audience's view to see different perspectives from traditional stagings, and this is seen overtly in his work staging the Bach *Passions*.

During his time at Emmanuel Church, the group of musicians, of which he was one of, would perform cantatas weekly in Sunday services, a practice that has continued for over forty years (Emmanuel Church, 2024). Sellars had always thought of Bach as being abstract, and it was through his experience at Emmanuel that he came to the belief that the music of Bach is not as abstract as he first thought.

These words are about lived experiences, and it is not a stylistic question, it is a question of truly engaging people's lives. At Emmanuel in that era, they had a homeless shelter, a shelter for battered women, a Salvadoran refugee programme...three chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous, there was drug counselling and of course, there was a suicide prevention centre. And when you hear Bach Cantata 199, after convincing someone not to kill themselves, you get that this music is deeply practical. And like alcoholics anonymous, it is twelve-step programme, you take each step with Bach, and Bach takes you and guides you through the next steps of your life, through turning things around towards recovery (Sellars, 2010, 1:42).

Sellars' bold embrace of significant cultural issues, whether it be war, famine, farming globalisation, or refugee crisis, is central to his interpretation of dramatic works, and audiences keenly anticipate what his next focus and its musical vehicle will be (Rockwell, 1990). Other opera productions of Sellars' examine humanitarian issues or a subversion of the role of women seen in traditional opera (Kinzer, 2003). Yet in his *Passions*, Sellars' purpose is far more nuanced and encompassing, driving both his understanding of Bach's music and the stagings of these works. Sellars believes in the fundamental uniqueness of all people so that each performer or audience members' response cannot and should not be the same, as they each bring their context to the table. In a discussion about the opening chorus of the *St. Matthew Passion*, he states:

I think, for me, the most moving thing about this chorus is that you feel every human being there. You don't get a group. It's not like a giant box of something. Every person is different. Every person in history, their own emotional life, their own personal hopes, their own imagination, and what I just invited people to, because what this piece is about, it's not theatre, it's a prayer, it's a meditation. (Sellars, 2010, 15:59)

The personal emotions or experiences of the performers and audience cannot and should not be assumed, so Sellars sets the stage for participants to wrestle and exercise their struggles, thoughts, and dreams. His view of Bach as a composer of doubt rather than one of affirmation (Sellars, 2010) aligns with the Lutheran doctrine that runs at the heart of Bach's music. For the reformed Lutheran, attending church on Sunday should not be a meeting of affirmation and contentedness, but where you are reminded of continued shortcomings and, most importantly, your need to respond with repentance (Thompson, 2017). Yet the great and embraced fallacy of the Lutheran Christian faith is that despite a person's failure and hopelessness, they are deeply loved and forgiven, so much so that God, whom they wrong, would sacrifice himself for mankind. The depth of these kinds of contradictions might be seen to be at the core of the *Passions* – singing of deep love and sorrow to Jesus, yet in the next breath, screaming to crucify him. Throughout the entire *Passion* there is a duality in roles – the Lutheran faith is that the Christian is both the disciple following Jesus, and those nailing him to the cross. Sellars identifies these incongruencies as central to his interpretation.

Depicting the divided mind, a divided self, being torn apart, *Knirscht* (crunch) being the fabulous verb in 'Buß und Reu', you know Bach gets his musical language from the *Knirscht* of the spirit and the body, from the *Knirscht* of the person you want to be and the person you are every day instead. The struggle between your multiple selves and your

multiple impulses, and what you've achieved and what you've totally failed to achieve.

And that struggle is at the heart of the composition (Sellars, 2010, 8:50).

Sellars' use of ritualisation, that is, the staging oratorios as an opera, is not unique to the *Passions* and has also been notably done in his 1996 production of Handel's *Theodora*. Kuriyama notes the strengths of this hybrid model of the religious and theatrical in this production, "wedding symbolic gesture and spiritual depth with the actors' dramatic gifts, provides the audience with an accessible toolbox to reinterpret this Baroque vocal work" (Kuriyama, 2015, p. 8). Sellars' purpose in the ritualisation of sacred music such as *Theodora* and the *Passions* is setting the stage for performers and audience members alike to bring to these works their contexts and struggles and to spend time processing and working these out through music. To establish this sense of ritualisation, Sellars' *Passions* are generally less movement-driven and contain more repetitive and emotionally driven gestures: embrace, massage, outstretched hands, and a kiss, to name a few. Its purpose is to trigger an emotional response and not be an exhaustive explanation of specific emotions that one should be experiencing (Atran, 2005). The ritualisation movements are simple in form but present striking and often shocking emotional convictions. These simple but striking actions can be seen in an unusual alto aria embedded with a chorus that starts Part Two of the *St. Matthew Passion*, 'Ach! Nun ist mein Jesus hin!'. In Sellars' production, responding to the mezzo soprano lamenting 'Ah! Now my Jesus is gone!' the chorus, one by one, stand with arms outstretched, comfortingly embracing her, asking, "Wo ist denn dein Freund hingegangen, O du Schönste unter den Weibern?" [Where has your friend gone, fairest of women?] (Bach, 1727). When arias often seem isolated and reflective, this is a rare moment when the soloist calls out, they are answered. The simple direction of being physically embraced in your moment of distress transforms what is likely a foreign concept of their Lord Jesus being gone into something highly relatable and emotionally connecting.

Other Sellars productions that incorporate sacred music often do so introspectively, where a sacred work is added within a secular opera to express a specific sentiment within the dramatised themes that are not conveyed explicitly in its music. An example of this is Sellars' production of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* at the Salzburg Festival in 2017. Sellars shifts the opera's themes from romantic love, loyalty and civic duty to focus on contemporary issues of class and racial divide, terrorism and the refugee crisis (Swed, 2017). This production removes all recitatives and alternatively inserts movements from Mozart's *Requiem*, *C minor Mass* and the *Masonic Funeral Music*. These movements are inserted to reflect the mood of the action on stage, so the Kyrie from the Mass in C Minor is used as the crowd mourns the attempted assassination of the Emperor (Nguyen, 2022b). Here, the specific thematic material of the sacred work is often extraneous to the action on stage, but instead, its common themes are used for dramatic purposes within the opera.

The effect of religious music, particularly funeral music selection in this case, goes well beyond the practical reality of its regular liturgical use. The innately hyper-emotional nature of requiems fuses the music used in these services with the often accompanying emotional baggage. This fusing between liturgical events and music means that a similar emotional response is often triggered even when the music is presented outside its usual liturgical context. As such, in Sellars' production of *La Clemenza*, the music itself is enough to capture and evoke a liturgical service without the event having to take place on stage. The emotions and purposes of the sacred rituals are therefore brought into these contemporary themes through liturgical music.

However, in the stagings of the *Passions*, for Sellars, the contemporary themes calling for social activism "springs from the same sources as his deep concern with spirituality" (McClary, 2019, p. 37). With its application to contemporary social issues, the welding of the spiritual nature of the *Passions* presents the notion that the ritualistic and artistic are more alike than not. The Evangelist

in each production, Mark Padmore, comments on Sellars' overarching purpose of the production, stating "He's got this vulnerability, he exposes himself, in a certain sense to his performers and audiences. I think he wants the piece itself, the *Matthew Passion*, to be that sort of meditation on the wound, and not the comfort, not the bandage." (Battle, 2014, para. 14)

The staging, therefore, presents this reflective and meditative purpose. It doesn't ascribe a specific time period or location, nor does it offer any costumes and minimal props – the *St. Matthew Passion* staging features only a bier, and the *St. John Passion* has nothing. The focus moves to how the physical actions of the performers reflect inner psychological turmoil. McClary (2019, p. 167) stated, "If Bach intended his congregants to experience rather than simply witness, Padmore illustrates with his own body how deeply we should feel the events onstage."



St. Matthew Passion, 2010, directed Peter Sellars, conductor Simon Rattle, Berlin Philharmonic, Berlin Rundfunkchor

3.2.1 The art of watching

A characteristic of the shape of the Thomaskirche, where *St. Matthew Passion* was premiered, is that the choir, organ and orchestra are located at the back of the church, with the congregation facing the front or sideways, but none facing towards the musicians (Butt, 2010a). The result of this is that emotional expression is limited only to sound. Stage presence or facial expression that is significant in other non-staged works such as oratorio, art song or lieder was not prioritised in the original presentation of Bach's *Passions* in Leipzig.

In Sellars' staging, however, we are presented with the intense facial and physical expressions of those performing and those not performing. How the Evangelist reacts to the various arias or chorales can be often seen as more significant than the reaction of the soloist, providing a cue to the audience of their possible response. The Evangelist's role in these stagings of the *Passions* is not confined to the narrative dialogue that Bach assigned, but also serves as a foil, additional character or even as Christ himself, often responding dramatically with the soloists and chorus (Sellars et al., 2010).

Furthermore, whilst all singers presented their arias from memory, many of the solo arias featuring obbligato lines were also memorised by the instrumentalists (Sellars et al., 2010). The obbligato lines are seen here as characters themselves, similar to that of the Evangelist or soloists (Sellars, 2010). The audience not only witnesses the reaction and expression of those singing, but the obbligato soloists are freed from their seats and stands and physically brought to the fore, often interacting with their accompanying soloist.

The Italian word *obbligato*, derived from the verb 'to oblige', becomes an indispensable element of that work, taking on a role equivalent to the solo vocalist. There has been limited research on

whether there is a common purpose for using obligato instruments in Bach's vocal music. Yet, Eric Chafe (2014) notes Bach's use of "special instruments" and the characters they become associated with.

Bach often does assign certain of the instruments roles and associations that, although not immutably fixed, are consistent enough to suggest that he recognised those associations as a valuable means of projecting theological content, and the interrelatedness of ideas from work to work. (Chafe, 2014, p. 485)

Chafe identifies the use of viola da gamba as being associated with punishment, first with the Jewish leaders and then with the Roman soldiers. Still, here, Sellars treats them as having the same extra-musical expressive power as the singers. In the *St. Matthew Passion*, the viola da gamba appears as an obligato instrument in two arias, 'Geduld, Geduld!' and 'Komm, süßes Kreuz', both of which present arguably some of the most challenging and demanding music in the instrument's repertoire.

In the 'Komm, süßes Kreuz', Sellars places the viola da gamba centre stage; the often-violent bow is directed to the audience as the player navigates the instrument. He places the bass soloist, Thomas Quasthoff, sitting on a box directly behind the gamba player, almost speaking through the instrument. In Bach's aria, the bass vocalist line is characterised by long, expressive phrases, allowing for introspection and contemplation, which is placed against the angular and textured virtuosic writing for the viola da gamba. Sellars explores then how these two seemingly incongruent themes can be expressed together. The two arias with a viola da gamba obligato display extreme virtuosity, and "Sellars insists that we witness the extreme physical exertion required of the viol player and demands that we try to make sense of the dialectic between them" (McClary, 2019, p. 189).

The aria is presented in the *Passion* narrative after the Roman soldiers compelled Simon of Cyrene to help Jesus carry the cross to Golgotha. The text reflects Simon's willingness to take on the burden of the cross and his understanding of the honour and privilege it is to bear the weight of Christ's suffering. The text reading (Bach, 1727, trans. Pamela Dellal):

<i>Komm, süßes Kreuz, so will ich sagen,</i>	<i>Come, sweet Cross, this I want to say:</i>
<i>Mein Jesu, gib es immer her!</i>	<i>My Jesus, give it always to me!</i>
<i>Wird mein Leiden einst zu schwer,</i>	<i>If my suffering becomes too heavy one day,</i>
<i>So hilfst du mir es selber tragen</i>	<i>You yourself will help me bear it.</i>

This character, embodied by the viola da gamba, acts as a deliberate contrast to that of the bass soloist—where we are called to reflect on this fallacy – how can something as violent and abrasive as the cross be sweet? The end of the aria concludes with Quasthoff leaning down and resting his head on the shoulder of gamba player Hille Perl. The cross serves as a pillow to rest the man's tired and weary head, whose suffering has become too heavy to hold.

This focus on visible dramatisation represents a significant departure from Bach's original context and has resulted in significant backlash from critics. Many see Bach's music as defining perfection, so shifting or inserting contemporary context into the work can never be a success. Telegraph reviewer Rupert Christiansen (2014), commenting on the 2014 performance of the staging at the BBC Proms, found the visible drama of the soloists distasteful, stating,

Once my eyes closed on this tasteless spectacle, much exquisite beauty was to be heard...Jesus was the peerless Christian Gerhaher, mercifully excluded from the play-acting and crucified off-stage. The disembodied sound of his despairing 'Eli, Eli lama

sabathani?’ was unforgettably moving. In their singing, the sound of this music was truly embodied. (Christiansen, 2014, para. 5)

It is clear that for some, any departure from what is seen as Bach’s original intention, that is the music alone, only takes away from musical perfection. Yet, as discussed, for Bach this music was not intended to dwell on a throne, or a Gardiner puts it “in the Castle of Heaven” (2013, p. 558), but to speak into the hearts and minds of his congregation as they are challenged to repent and believe. The faith of Bach was not one seen only through closed eyes and audible beauty, but of the real and tactile torture and execution of a first-century Jew. There is a connection between theological depth and real-life drama that invites the staging of the *Passions*. The work’s liturgical purpose enables an aspect that is inherently practical—it invites a physical response from the audience throughout – that is to worship. But even more so, the congregational singing of the hymns that would have been inserted throughout the *Passion*, immediately serves to stage the work, where the performer-audience dynamic is fractured and instead this is work intended for intense practicality (Butt, 2010a).

In many ways, this is the beautiful yet often ugly friction that frequently eventuates through altering the author’s original context. By adopting a co-authorship model, you are inherently met with two distinct creative visions operating in tandem – that of the director and that of Bach. The friction that occurs is then how do these different and at times conflicting intentions operate in the same space? To change a work is by its very nature a risk, and this may pay dividends in connecting contemporary ideals with current audiences, or it may not – and neither is ‘wrong’. Sellars’ staging does not propose that the emotional intensity of Bach’s music alone is insufficient, but rather how its purpose can be altered or directed elsewhere by inserting contemporary themes and values. These themes and values, fundamentally, are not exclusive to contemporary culture. One need only examine the counter-cultural perspective on women

portrayed in the gospels to recognise this (McLaughlin, 2024). However, Sellars' intent lies in the nuanced portrayal of how these themes resonate in today's culture. This underscores Bach's perceived universality; although his themes may not appear commonplace on the surface, they possess the ability to address issues transcending temporal boundaries.

There is an inherent incongruousness of this action in bringing something of the past into the present, where there will always be something alien in its nature. So, it is unsurprising that audiences will regularly respond negatively to *Regietheater*. Yet what Taruskin may describe as 'wrong' is where Christiansen (2014, para. 1) continues, stating: "It's high time to call a moratorium on attempts to stage or pictorialize oratorio: great composers knew what they were doing in adopting the conventions of sacred drama, and adding a laminate of theatricality to their conceptions tends to dilute rather than intensify the music's spiritual power." Whilst one may dislike or disapprove of a director's presentation of a work, this prohibition on individual expression and convictions in interpreting a work, as distasteful as it may be to some, lifts a handbrake on what Taruskin would see as genuine authenticity.

We seem to have paid a heavy price indeed for the literacy that sets Western musical culture so much apart and makes its past available in the first place if the text must be so venerated. Is the text only an exacting responsibility? And if so, to what or whom is the responsibility due? Can the text not be an opportunity – for the exercise of imagination, the communication of delight, even the sharing of emotion? Can there be no reconciliation between the two authenticities, that is, the authenticity of the object performed and the authenticity of the subject performing? (Taruskin, 1995, p. 72)

Taruskin does not reconcile these "complex and daunting set of questions" (Taruskin, 1984, p. 6), but merely asking them encourages us to privilege the potential for meaningful a creative

response to a work of the past. This is Sellars' mission, seeing the *Passions* of Bach as an opportunity "for the exercise of imagination, the communication of delight, even the sharing of emotion" to speak uniquely into this cultural moment. His manipulation of dramatic elements of staging and music changes the context of the work's original inception, seeking to reconcile these two authenticities.

Therefore, the mindset when viewing these stagings should not be how Sellars is seeking to amplify Bach's themes and purpose in the work, but rather how he aims to use Bach's music in conjunction with his own ideas to direct our focus to a specific point.

3.2.2 The art of listening

The design of the Philharmonie in Berlin, where Sellars' initial production of the *St. Matthew Passion* was performed, is unique in its physical shape (Posener, 1964). The audience almost encompasses the stage, making it in some sense 'in the round'. The orchestra is then directly exposed to the audience, which leads to one other unique reflective characteristic of the work, as Peter Sellars notes in an interview with Simon Halsey, chorusmaster of the Berlin Rundfunkchor (Sellars, 2010, 13:56):

This space with two choruses, two orchestras facing each other, where there's no proscenium, where people are performing to each other, and what you're getting is a community engaging with itself, and you're watching a community work through the issues together...Bach wrote the music of that kind of mutual engagement and mutual regard...One of the most moving things is one orchestra has to listen while the other orchestra plays, one chorus has to listen while the other sings. So, equal time is spent playing or singing and listening silently, having to be receptive and take something in. As

a performer, you're usually putting stuff out, and what's so fulfilling about the structure of this piece is you spend half the night having to open yourself to receive, which for an orchestra member or chorus member is extraordinary.

This radical shift from a linear relationship between performers and audience to one of mutual participants can be confronting to players. Most musical training focuses on emotional depth and understanding within the music you are performing; how can you embody the depth of the character or *affekts* of the music. Here, Sellars emphasises Bach's proposal that each orchestra or chorus is responding to the other, and so to respond best and most appropriately, you must first listen to what the other has to say. The very nature of listening is that we have no choice but to insert our contemporary context; our mind is unique at this time, so we process and respond accordingly. The process of listening and responding in the *St. Matthew Passion* is similar to that of an inhalation and exhalation of breath, and after we inhale, what we exhume is intimately infused with the former.

This feature of listening and response is introduced within Bach's orchestration in the opening chorus, 'Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen' [Come, ye daughters, help me lament]. The opening begins with a mournful call sung by the first choir, which is answered by a response from the second choir. This pattern continues throughout the chorus as the two choirs take turns expressing their grief, reflecting the text's plea for the daughters of Zion to join in mourning. The orchestras also participate in this musical dialogue, each orchestra and choir moving as a homogenous chorus, asking the other whom they are beholding.

Sellars stages this opening with both choruses gathered centre-stage surrounding an empty wooden block. Even the dress of the musicians is indicative of Victorian-era black crêpe used for mourning – that is, clothing crafted from unadorned matte black textiles, worn devoid of any

accessories such as jewellery. Notably, after the death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861, in Queen Victoria's reign, wearing a matte black mourning dress became a significant marker of social respectability (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2018). Mourning for a widow lasted a year, after which a period of half-mourning began, where the widow could introduce grey and subtle shades of purple. In Sellars' production, there is a particular casualness to the blacks that the musicians wear; some wear long-sleeved black shirts, others in collared shirts, none with a tie or jacket. It is presented as if this is normality and that they live in a profound mourning period.

This funeral-like gathering is then dispersed as the music begins, each member slowly walking away, back turned and head bowed in mourning. As the first chorus begins, the second does not acknowledge them and instead remains with their backs turned; many are kneeling with their faces buried in their hands. The ripieno chorus sings from off-stage within the audience, as if somehow removed and above the grief and dialogue occurring onstage. One chorus moves across the stage to meet the other, now paired up, asking and responding to each other face-to-face, embracing and holding hands. The text from the opening chorus reading (Bach, 1727/1989):

Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen! Sehet!	<i>Come, ye daughters, help me lament, Behold!</i>
Wen? Den Bräutigam.	<i>Whom? The Bridegroom.</i>
Seht ihn! Wie? Als wie ein Lamm!	<i>Behold him! How? Like a lamb.</i>
Sehet! Was? Seht die Geduld.	<i>Behold! What? Behold his patience.</i>
Seht! Wohin? Auf unsre Schuld.	<i>Behold! Where? Behold our guilt.</i>
Sehet ihn aus Lieb und Huld	<i>Behold Him, out of love and graciousness,</i>
Holz zum Kreuze selber tragen!	<i>Himself carrying the wood of the cross.</i>

Sellars immediately establishes that these questions are not hypothetical but are asked to be answered by us. The physical nature of the interaction between both choirs acts almost to break the fourth wall. Often each choir split in two by an imaginary wall, standing and sitting as they each sing their respective choruses, is now gone – they know each other intimately and mourn together.

Whilst both choruses only sing at the same time in a chorus twice more in the *St. Matthew Passion* ('Sind Blitze, sind Donner in Wolken verschwunden?' and 'Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder'), the expectation is established from the beginning that these are not independent orchestras and choruses. They often represent distinct groups in the narrative; one chorus often represents the faithful followers, the disciples and believers; an example of this is in the chorus 'Wo willst du, daß wir dir berreiten' [Where wilt Thou, Lord, that we shall all eat] where the disciples are asking Jesus where he would like them to prepare the Passover meal.

Alternatively, the second chorus is often seen as the mocking crowd, sceptics and persecutors, observed in choruses such as 'Wahrlich, du bist auch einer von denen' [You really are one of them] as the crowd accuses Peter of being a disciple of Jesus. Yet at times, both choirs at vital dramatic points join together yet still distinct choirs, creating an eight-part cacophony of chaotic aggression, most notably as Jesus stands trial before the high priests in 'Sind Blitze, sind Sonner in Wolken verschwunden?' [Have lightning and thunder vanished into clouds?]. Throughout the *Passion* narrative, we are presented with a constant symbolism of duality, that the story of Christ's crucifixion involves opposing forces of good and evil, faith and doubt, sacrifice and betrayal, and the two choruses and orchestras represent this overarching theme of duality. This hearkens back to the *Knirsch*, that Sellars contends is the central themes of the work.

Yet, while the two groups often represent opposing perspectives, they also come together in critical moments of unity and reconciliation. Both choirs sing the chorale ‘O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß’ [O mankind, bewail your great sin], signifying a moment of collective reflection and repentance. This chorale falls at the point in the narrative where all have betrayed Christ – the chief priests, elders and Judas had come to arrest Jesus. After he was arrested, immediately preceding the chorale, the Evangelist states, ‘Da verließen ihn alle Jünger und flohen’ [Then all his disciples abandoned him and fled]. Here, the unity of choruses is not one to be celebrated but of their joint collaboration in betraying Jesus. Until now, we have a clear distinction between choruses, one good and one evil, and it is at this moment that we see the blame is universal.

In Sellars’ production, he surprisingly instructs both choruses and ripieno children’s chorus to flee into the audience seemingly, and it is from here that they sing this chorale. The chorus is positioned in all corners of the concert hall, surrounding the audience further. So, the complicit nature of the betrayal is felt by both choruses and the audience. The effect here is to force the audience to reflect on their involvement in the story. The preceding text by the Evangelist signals this action, ‘Da verließen ihn alle Jünger und flohen’ [Then did all the disciples flee and forsake him]. The chorus does not flee off-stage but rather into the audience, questioning their joint culpability, how have they too betrayed or ignored those they love or those who are innocently abused.

3.2.3 The focus on women

Several contemporary issues are brought to focus in Sellars’ stagings of both *Passions*. Perhaps the most significant is how the female roles are transformed within this staging. The prominence of women’s experience within the productions of Sellars is not uncommon. However, the emphasis on this within the *Passions* becomes stark due to the relative insignificance of female narrative

roles within Bach's narrative presentation and the Biblical story itself. In the *St. Matthew Passion*, the only female roles are that of Pilate's wife and two ancillae maids, and in the *St. John Passion*, there is only one female character, and that is the maid.

This brief encounter with female characters within the recitatives can often get subsumed by the weight of the drama told between the Evangelist, Jesus, Peter, Pilate and the *turba* chorus. Yet their inclusion is not by accident in the gospel account. Matthew 27.19 states:

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.' (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 27.19)

This detail appears insignificant, particularly when Pilate gives in to the crowd's request.

However, the only person who dared to intervene on behalf of Jesus was "A woman. A gentle woman. A pagan woman. The wife of the Roman governor. The wife of a man who answered to the emperor" (Pritchard, 2016, para. 7). It was no secret that Jesus was innocent; Pilate himself was aware and declared during the trial, yet his cowardice from the crowd or political motivations prevented him from delivering a just verdict (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 27).

Sellars uses focalisation to present audiences with a unique perspective towards the women in the narrative, seeing them as we otherwise would not. Here, we have what Genette (1997) defines as Internal Focalization, where the audience is granted access to a particular character's thoughts, perceptions, and experiences, immersing them in the character's subjective world. Focalisation involves the deliberate choice of the director to mould an audience's perspective by limiting their vision.

In Bach's original context, using the four soloists may have had broad application to explore theological or emotional themes related to the *Passion* narrative rather than assuming a specific role or perspective. Yet here, as in other productions by Sellars, he insists on the centrality of women and their experiences that would otherwise be forgotten. Sellars made two deliberate choices in casting the roles: using a mezzo-soprano instead of a countertenor. Secondly, as McClary (2019) notes, Sellars gives the female soloists consistent roles across his staging of both *Passions*; the soprano as a figure of motherhood, mother of Judas Iscariot, of the sons of Zebedee, and finally of Jesus himself; and the mezzo-soprano being Mary Magdalene.

3.2.4 Women in the Gospel

Mary Magdalene plays a concise and seemingly insignificant role in the *Passion* narrative, being an onlooker to the crucifixion of Jesus and being with the other Marys when the stone was rolled in front of the grave (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 27.56, 27.61, 28.1). Yet women's experiences in the Gospel accounts present a countercultural and revolutionary perspective in emphasising their value and dignity (McLaughlin, 2024). The encounters that Jesus has with women are filled with respect and compassion. He meets people from various social backgrounds, including Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery and many others. Even the birth of Christ subverts societal and religious expectation of the Messiah-born to a poor virgin in a stable. Yet it is through this subversion that women play a crucial role in the redemption of God's people (Bauckham, 2002). He is willing to challenge social norms and engage in meaningful conversations with women.

The perspective of women in the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection was notably counter-cultural (McLaughlin, 2024). It was women who bore witness to these

pivotal events and were tasked with disseminating the news of the resurrections. This underscores the substantial role they assumed in the early Christian narrative, thereby challenging the prevailing gender norms of their era. All four gospels portray women as the first to encounter the risen Christ. In Jewish and Greco-Roman societies of that era, women's testimony was often considered less reliable and less valuable than men's (Simmonds, 2022). Their legal and societal status was lower, and their witness was frequently dismissed or viewed with suspicion. The gospel accounts depicting Jesus appearing first to women and entrusting them with the news of his resurrection, the Christian account was deliberately challenging and overturning these societal biases. It affirmed women's equal worth and credibility as witnesses to the most pivotal event in Christian theology.

3.2.5 Women in the time of Bach

During Bach's time, women occupied a subordinate role and faced significant societal restrictions. They had limited opportunities for educational and professional pursuits, were primarily confined to the domestic sphere, and participated in public and social life. Even within the context of Bach, women's roles were limited mainly to performing domestic tasks, providing musical instruction within the family, and occasionally participating as singers in church (Fulker, 2016).

Yet Wendy Heller (2021) notes that a core tenant of the Lutheran opposition to Catholic teachings was Luther's criticism of the practice of celibacy for priests and nuns, asserting that marriage was not solely focused on procreation. Luther delineated distinct roles for husband and wives while underscoring the significance of marital love and partnership, that the love between spouses should be the most profound and untainted of all loves – what he referred to as “bridal love”, characterised by a burning passion that seeks nothing more than unity with one's spouse

(Luther, 1519, as cited in Karant-Nunn & Wiesner-Hanks, 2003, p. 90). Yet, as Heller discusses, it is surprising that Bach's soprano and mezzo soprano arias capture affekts and moods that can be considered inherently feminine. Yet, they would have been performed by male singers – treble boys or countertenors. It is difficult for a modern listener to understand how these male singers may have captured the feminine tropes in specific arias, be it themes of motherhood, longing, contentment, or sensual love. Heller proposes that perhaps similar to an Elizabethan audience viewing Shakespeare, audiences were far more accustomed to using their imagination when considering conventional gender expectations (Heller, 2021, p. 107).

Heller's proposition seems to defy the twentieth-century performance practice movements sensibilities, arguing that "the modern-day preference for female sopranos in Bach's sacred music...is in fact a function of qualities intrinsic to the music: a sense of femininity that was central to Bach's musical expression of Lutheran theology, and that is still palpable to contemporary listeners, even as the original theological context has faded away" (Heller, 2021, p. 80). From the revival of Bach in the nineteenth century, his music for soprano has unquestionably been ascribed to female voices and bodies. A few recordings of the music of Bach, most notably by Harnoncourt and Leonhardt, have featured soprano arias performed by boy trebles, and these have been treated as a noble attempt yet overwhelmingly rejected (Heller, 2021). Yet perhaps the two most distinctively feminine of cantatas, those for solo soprano, Harnoncourt left to American Barbara Bonney in *Mein Herz schwimmt im Blut*, BWV 199 and Dutch soprano Marianne Kweksilber in *Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen*, BWV 51. Looking at *Mein Herz schwimmt im Blut*, BWV 199, the adult themes and complex emotional journey seem inconsistent with the innocence and purity often associated with a treble voice, a viewpoint that Harnoncourt appears to agree with due to his selection of a soprano.

3.2.6 Women in Sellars' staging

Sellars' staging of the *Passions* leans on these feminine qualities inherent in Bach's writing. He identifies this radical depiction of women in the Gospel accounts and in Bach's music and explicitly explores their perspectives in his staging, something that would have been near impossible in the context of Bach. Even his initial starting position in the selection of female soloists allows for this exploration, where, had Sellars chosen a countertenor to perform this solo, he would have been greatly restricted in this opportunity.

A key feature of many *Regietheater* stagings is the female gaze (Kühnel et al., 2007), which refers to a perspective or viewpoint that emphasises the portrayal and interpretation of the world through a female lens. German director Ruth Berghaus was particularly known for this in her stagings of Mozart operas. Although she never explicitly used the term, Berghaus aimed to challenge traditional gender roles and power dynamics in her stagings, offering alternative interpretations and highlighting the experiences and perspectives of female characters. In Mozart's operas, Berghaus often reimaged the female characters to give them agency, depth and complexity. This approach sought to subvert and challenge the patriarchal narratives that had historically dominated opera (Yunker, 2012).

The inherent nature of the *Passions* places the male characters at the centre—Jesus, Judas, Pilate, and Peter; all of the interesting dramatic elements revolve around the dialogue or monologue of these characters. Sellars dwells on the few significant moments women bring into the narrative. As discussed, the inclusion of women being mentioned, let alone having an essential narrative function in the Gospels, was hugely counter-cultural and so of huge significance (McLaughlin, 2024). Through his stagings, he provides characters that may initially seem cursory and insignificant with agency and depth, making them focal points in the *Passions*.

Sellars not only utilised women as soloists, as McClary (2019) notes, but he also used their impending motherhood. In the 2010 premiere performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* production at the Philharmonie, the soprano soloist was Camilla Tilling, who at the time was heavily pregnant. Sellars' use of such a soloist would seem no accident, with Tilling's character staged to represent different kinds of motherhood – the mother of Judas Iscariot, the sons of Zebedee and Christ himself.

The first example of this is seen in the soprano aria 'Blute nur, du liebes Herz', which occurs in response to Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Christ, having sold out the whereabouts of Jesus for thirty silver pieces. She expresses deep sorrow and remorse for Judas' betrayal, lamenting the consequences of such an act, repeating the phrase that translates as 'Bleed on, dear heart'. Singing this sorrowful aria, Tilling holds and rubs her pregnant belly. Normally, this would be a gesture of joyful anticipation. However, it seems as if she is singing to the unborn child, aware of the terrible betrayal it will bring into the world. McClary (2019, p. 168) writes, "The aria becomes very particularly the expression of a woman who bewails the treachery of her still unborn child." The character of Judas' mother appears nowhere in the Bible, yet the librettist Picander's text invites this interpretation. The aria appearing directly after the account of Judas betraying Christ, the soprano sings, "Ach! ein Kind, das du erzogen, das an deiner Brust gesogen, droht den Flegel zu ermorden, den es ist zur Schlange worden" [Ah! A child, whom you reared, that sucked at your breast, is threatening to murder its guardian for that child has become a serpent] (Bach, 1727).

The theological interpretation of the text implies a symbolic representation of motherhood, wherein it addresses the collective culpability of humanity for sin, rather than singling out any particular individual (Franklin, 2015). While it was Judas who was the betrayer of Christ, within

Lutheran theology, his actions are additionally representative of the broader betrayal committed by all of humanity (France, 2007). Yet Sellars' makes a deliberate shift into the themes of this aria being physically represented on stage – the impending mother of Judas is in fact a woman about to give birth, the character of Judas physically walks on stage and encounters his mother. Sellars has made a considerable effort to highlight this inner turmoil of a woman knowing the horror that awaits her unborn son, yet all the while being part of God's plan.

The staging of this aria is simple and focused towards this fact – Tilling, when standing, rests her hand on her pregnant stomach or covers her face in shame with her hands. At the end of the B-section, Jörg Schneider, who played Judas, and delivered his recitatives from a seat within the audience emerges on stage, walking past and recognising Tilling, yet she turns her head away in grief and shame. Sellars' deliberate approach in this particular staged aria renders the narrative relevant to contemporary audiences. The enduring emotional connecting and physical challenges experienced by women during pregnancy persist today, underscoring the timeless relevance of the depicted themes, yet by providing the aria personhood allows for audiences to directly empathise with their experience.

The Lutheran view of Judas Iscariot sees his actions as a tragic example of human sin and failure. His actions were a fulfilment of prophecy and part of God's plan for the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, yet this does not absolve Judas of personal responsibility for his betrayal. He is a cautionary figure, illustrating the dangers of greed, unbelief, and the consequences of betraying one's faith (France, 2007). There is something disarmingly and tragically normal and relatable created through Sellars' staging of Tilling in this aria. Tilling is portrayed as a grieving expectant mother, embodying a universal archetype that resonates with any member of the audience. The characterisation of Tilling as an ordinary individual, juxtaposed with Judas' unexpected entrance from the audience, serves to underscore the notion that his motivations and

actions are reflective of shared human tendencies, suggesting that any individual does harbour traits akin to those exhibited by Judas.

Sellars ascribes the role of the popularly historically dramatized, yet historically inaccurate, Mary Magdalene to mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kožená. Mary Magdalene is mentioned several times across all four gospels, yet the character of this Mary that Sellars creates in his staging is a significant deviation from that depicted in the Bible. To utilise Genette's terminology, it is essential to initially analyse the hypotext of the Biblical portrayal of Mary Magdalene, that is also adopted by Bach. This approach enables a more comprehensive view of Sellars' reinterpretation presented in his hypertext.

While she is noted as being present during Jesus' travels and providing support for him and his disciples after being freed from several demons (New International Version, 2011, Luke 8.1-3), most important is her role in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. She is depicted as one of the women who stood near the cross during Jesus' crucifixion (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 27.55-56; Mark 15.40 and John 19.25), as well as being the first to encounter the risen Jesus at his empty tomb (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 18.1-10, Mark 16.1-11, Luke 24.1-11 and John 20.1-18). Finally, following her encounter with the risen Jesus, Mary Magdalene was entrusted with a message to deliver to the disciples to tell of Jesus' resurrection (New International Version, 2011, Mark 16.9-11 and John 20.18).

Over the centuries, Mary Magdalene has been a subject of various interpretations. "In one age after another her image was reinvented, from prostitute to sibyl to mystic to celibate nun to passive helpmate to feminist icon to the matriarch of divinity's secret dynasty" (Carroll, 2006, para. 1). A significant part of this confusion comes from a lack of understanding of the Gospels, where several women are named Mary. There is Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary of

Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus; Mary, the mother of Joseph and James; Mary, the wife of Clopas; and Mary Magdalene.

In Luke's Gospel, immediately preceding a specific mention of Mary Magdalene as well as two other women, Joanna and Susanna, having provided for Jesus and his disciples, we are presented with this passage:

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.' (New International Version, 2011, Luke 36-39)

This story of the woman wiping Jesus' feet with perfume, her tears and her hair, has historically become the dramatic high point of the narrative of Mary Magdalene. Magdalene washing Jesus' feet has been dramatised by art and stories across the centuries (artworks by Beschey, Coxie and Subleyras, to name a few). Yet, there is no evidence in the text mentioning Mary Magdalene. The same story is depicted in Mark's Gospel, and in Matthew's stating:

While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was

reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. 'Why this waste?' they asked. 'This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.'

Aware of this, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.' (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 26.6-13)

It is clear that the woman in the story is, in fact, not Mary Magdalene, but rather the wife of Simon the Leper from Bethany. This is also, confusingly, often considered Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

In Sellars' production, he leans into the depiction of Mary Magdalene as the woman wiping Jesus' feet. Unlike in Matthew and Mark's account of the story, Luke's Gospel does not mention the purpose of the ritual of preparing a body for burial. Reading Luke's account in isolation has clear erotic overtones (Carroll, 2006), and the offence taken by the disciples in Matthew and Mark's account are related to money, yet in Luke's account, it is due to being "touched" (New International Version, 2011, Luke 7.39). Sellars' staging of this scene responds more to the account in Luke's Gospel, and this scene's central aria, 'Buß und Reu' [Penance and remorse], has drawn considerable attention for its staging. Here, Kožená, playing the role of Mary Magdalene, pours ointment on Jesus' body, represented on stage by the Evangelist.

The interaction begins in the proceeding extended accompanied recitative by Christus, which recounts the loving deeds of the woman in pouring ointment on the feet of Jesus. The recitative concludes with the line, “Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the whole world, people will remember her and what she did” (Bach, 1727). Here, Sellars establishes Kožená as Magdalene, embracing the Evangelist, with Padmore placing his head in her breast. After the recitative, Kožená cradles Padmore’s head with both hands, sensually kissing his forehead.

McClary, in *Desire and Pleasure* (2012), notes widespread belief in Jesus as the eagerly awaited bridegroom is reflected in numerous duets within the B Minor Mass, where the music simulates an intimate connection between the soul and Christ. Whilst the physical action on stage is left to Kožená and Padmore, Sellars still highlights the intertwining flute through their placement both standing directly behind the two vocalists, seductively accompanying what is happening in front of them. Kožená conducts anointing gestures to the Evangelist, explicitly echoing a sensual reciprocal love shared between the soul of the woman and Christ. The gestures summoned here are so direct that Telegraph opera critic Rupert Christiansen (2014, para. 4) feared that “we were about to witness an act of fellatio”.

Yet in the da capo, we see what Sellars discusses as the *knirscht* [break]. As McClary notes, we are presented with “the image of violent sundering” (McClary, 2019, p. 173). In this poignant instance, Kožená tightly clasps her fists on Padmore’s chest, conveying a profound emotional connection. Then, they forcefully separate them with an intensity that creates a visceral sensation, as if tearing the soul away from the flesh. Once more, we witness this almost frightful contradiction, where, in one fleeting moment, they are bound as intimate lovers, entwined in a passionate embrace, only to be abruptly and forcefully torn apart in the next. The flute’s haunting melody plays out, serving as a melancholic backdrop to Kožená’s reluctant departure,

her visible distress suggesting a deep emotional turmoil and a foresight into the unfolding events that are about to transpire.

Another alto aria of note in Bach's writing is the 'Erbarme dich, mein Gott' [Have mercy on me], which is a lamenting response to Peter's betrayal. In an intriguing choice, as it is thought to embody the character of Peter, Bach scores the aria for the alto voice alongside an obbligato violin. This musical pairing goes beyond the conventional, evoking a sorrow that surpasses typical expressions of grief. The violin's dynamic shifts, oscillating between sustained notes and elaborate ornamentation, mirror the imagined tears rolling down Peter's face. To maintain the coherence of the narrative, Sellars positions the chorus member playing Peter collapsed on the wooden platform, with Padmore kneeling beside him to provide solace during the dramatically melismatic line 'und weinete bitterlich' [and wept bitterly] (Bach, 1727). Contrary to potentially disrupting Kožená's established role as Mary Magdalene, McClary (2019) suggests that her inclusion serves not as a departure but rather as an emphasis on her symbolic representation of penitence. This reinterpretation aligns Kožená with the thematic elements of the performance, reinforcing her symbolic significance in the portrayal of remorse and redemption.

The portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a romantic partner or consort of Jesus, notably popularised in contemporary culture by Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, wherein he posited that Leonardo da Vinci depicted Magdalene in his rendition of the Last Supper, predates these modern interpretations. One particular figure who explored this theme was the 17th-century English poet Richard Crawshaw (1648) in the poem *The Weeper*. McClary (2019) notes similarities in Sellars' presentation of Mary Magdalene as that of Crawshaw, as the poem delves into themes centred around religious devotion and an individual's emotional reactions to Christ's suffering. Crawshaw uses vivid and intense imagery and metaphorical expressions to vividly communicate the deep emotional journey of the weeper as they contemplate the divine. The poet employs

these literary devices to convey the profound and intense emotions experienced by the weeper in response to Christ's suffering.

Peter Sellars in an interview discussing his staging of John Adam's opera *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* (Fulker, 2017), provocatively proclaims that "The central figure in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is Mary Magdalene". Susan McClary writes of Sellars:

I emphasise the women-centred dimension of [his] production of *Figaro* because it will become crucial to Sellars in his choice of operas (*Theodora*, *Iolanta*), in the ways he shapes his libretti (*Doctor Atomic*, *El Niño*, *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*, *The Indian Queen*), and even in his staging of the Bach *Passions*...If Sellars learned feminism at Mozart's feet, he has carried it as a necessity throughout the rest of his career. (McClary, 2019, p. 24)

When further questioned about what fascinates Sellars about the character of Mary Magdalene, Sellars continues:

Jesus was very clear that he wasn't here to be with nice or easy people. He was here to be with people who are on the edge, who are prone to suicide, violence and struggle. Mary and Jesus live together, and people are saying, 'Don't you know this is a prostitute?' And Jesus says very clearly, 'I'd rather be with her than with lots of other people.'

You get the sense that when your life is collapsing and you've made the biggest mistakes is when spiritual hunger is at its deepest and the closeness to God is so real, necessary and urgent. There's the sense that you need to have faith and step into the unknown with all your heart and being.

This woman represents that desperation, courage and an unmitigated act of love. And when Jesus is arrested, the disciples flee—but the women remain. And on the morning of the Resurrection, it's the women who are the first to see the angels and report the Resurrection. So I think the Bible also gives them a very special place. You just don't hear what they have to say. We've changed that! (Fulker, 2017, para. 9-11)

While discussing both Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and Adams' opera, Sellars emphasises the centrality of Mary Magdalene in the *Passion* narrative. This emphasis reflects Taruskin's argument, which posits that contemporary artists bring their own context to the performance of Bach's music. Sellars, influenced by his experiences at Emmanuel Church Boston, interprets Bach's music by placing the downcast and marginalised, Mary Magdalene, at the centre, considering her a symbol of contemporary human struggles and ideals. Faced with the challenge of interpreting a character with no spoken lines and minimal mentions in the text, Sellars employs the same tools used within the *Regietheater* genre of directing. In this approach, he assumes a co-authorship role with Bach, developing and expanding Mary Magdalene's character, as well as other female figures within the *Passion* narrative.

4. Contemporaneous Concerns with the *Passions* of Bach

Music is a potent force that permeates every facet of human society, from cultural expression and entertainment to social cohesion and political activism. Its functions in society are diverse and complex, and are evolving with the ever-changing landscapes of technology, culture and politics (Townsend, 2019). This chapter explores how contemporary performances of music from the past offer a notably direct and discernible means of interaction with society. This is facilitated by the ability to juxtapose the hypertext with its hypotext, allowing for comparative analysis. However, this juxtaposition, particularly in the staging of Bach's *Passions*, also exposes contemporary concerns related to religion, antisemitism, historical context, and their relevance in an increasingly secular and pluralistic society. By taking on the role of co-authors, directors inherit the responsibility of these historical works. Their task then becomes one of balancing reverence for the original compositions with the need to engage with present-day issues, such as religious sensitivity and broader inclusivity, to ensure the works remain both artistically compelling and ethically relevant for today's audiences.

Nevertheless, there are growing contemporaneous concerns regarding how music functions in society, particularly concerning music from the past that portrays cultural elements that may be perceived as discordant with contemporary societal norms. This presents itself in a range of art-forms, most notably literature and opera. Stephen Mould (2024, para. 2), who leads a research project investigating the future of opera in Australia, notes that "opera has always acted as a mirror of society, a function that it retains today." Yet inversely, when it does not act reflective of society, it is promptly noticed.

In Australia most recently, this played out in a 2022 Opera Australia production of *Turandot*. Set in ancient China, the opera embodies Western stereotypes of Asian women, and orchestration and costumes evoking Chinese aesthetics. What is core repertoire for Opera Australia, became the centre of a cultural debate when Cat-Thao Nguyen (2022a) wrote an opinion piece for the Sydney Morning Herald, titled *Ping, Pong, Pang: we went to enjoy the opera but found it perpetuating racism*. Nguyen writes:

As I sat in the theatre, the horrible caricatures kept coming like a tidal assault. Ping, Pong and Pang pranced around the stage with their Fu Manchu-style moustaches and fake long ponytails flicking across their costumes. I felt utterly sick. I clutched my husband and clamped my hand over my mouth. As the scenes unfolded, I felt a violent wilting of dignity for myself and my Chinese husband. (Nguyen, 2022a, para. 6)

What has traditionally been a common practice in theatres worldwide now faces scrutiny within the multicultural context of Australian society. The historical portrayal of exotic and enigmatic elements, once distant, now becomes proximate due to globalisation. At the same time, there has been the recognition of inequitable representation across the arts and cultural industries due to transgenerational and systemic racism (Scott et al., 2023). Consequently, the inaccuracies of such caricatures are glaringly evident. Nguyen continues, “First, we must ask, is its production equitable? Second, if such shows are to continue, there must be a brave, considered effort to retell these stories in a balanced and restorative way.” (Nguyen, 2022a, para. 11). Most often, the active response to these questions involve, to varying degrees, *Regietheater*.

Nguyen herself briefly discusses Seattle Opera’s 2017 production of *Madame Butterfly*, an opera that regularly faces criticism for its depiction of Japanese culture and perpetuating stereotypes about submissive Asian women. On the Seattle Opera (2017) description of this production they

write of the concerns raised by the cultural representations in the opera. In mounting the opera, they acknowledge the historical cultural appropriation within the opera, and fostered discussions on diverse representation. Alongside performances, they paired the work with exhibitions aimed to deepen understanding of marginalised communities, particularly Japanese Americans.

The contemporaneous concerns within opera are far reaching, and not limited to race. One only must look at the portrayal of women in *Così fan tutte*, *Rigoletto* or *Don Giovanni*; or racial stereotypes within *Othello*, *Aida* and *The Mikado*. As previously examined, Wagner's operas encountered similar concerns during the mid-twentieth century. In response, reinterpretations emerged, employing *Regietheater* techniques to assume co-authorship with Wagner. The result of these efforts, aimed at reintegrating Wagner's music into society, largely succeeded, evident in the enduring popularity of his operas worldwide, despite persistent controversy.

The temperature surrounding these concerns appears to only be getting hotter. In Perl's provocative article for *The New Republic* titled *Liberals are killing art* (Perl, 2014), he argues of the increasing unease by the left-wing of the emotions evoked by the arts. He argues that despite left-leaning support in rational public policy, they have lost touch with the "unfettered metaphor and mystery and magic" of art (Perl, 2014, para. 1). Perl sees that art itself has become an outlier, viewed with suspicion for its tendency to celebrate purposeless creativity. The complexity of this is seen most clearly in the debate concerning art's relationship with politics, and he cites the recent controversy of Gergiev's support for Putin. Perl argues that arguments by critics such as Alex Ross, stating that politics and art are inseparable, and tries to place a logical solution to the equation between art and societal values. This belief that the insistence on linking the artist's personal life with their work is indicative of a desire for cohesion and moral alignment. He concludes by arguing that the preservation of the autonomy of art from the artist is essential in fostering creativity and enhancing the power of art itself, and that the essence of art is at risk of

being lost as a result of attempts to rationalise and qualify its value. This mindset has inherent dangers by removing the political and social contexts that shape an artist's work. It perpetuates the myth that artists are immune to societal privilege and influence, positioning them above critique and beyond questioning. This perspective not only erases the forces of power and privilege that may contribute to their success but also hinders a critical understanding of art as inherently shaped by the artist's environment, social dynamics, and political realities.

Alex Ross, a critic for *The New Yorker*, responded to Perl in an article titled *As if Music Could Do No Harm* (Ross, 2014). In responding to Perl's criticism of Ross' own discussion on Gergiev, he clarifies his position, stating that artists cannot "engage in blatantly political activity and then, in the face of protest, insist that politics has nothing to do with art" (Ross, 2014, para. 3). When art-for-art's-sake is used as a protective shield it rots the aspiration position that critics such as Perl defend. Ross continues, and highlights the argument made in this paper:

The problem is acute in classical music because of a longstanding devotion to the concept of 'absolute music' – the idea that Bach, Beethoven, and the rest inhabit a spiritually pure sphere, far above the vulgarities of politics. (Ross, 2014, para. 4)

As Ross similarly quotes Taruskin's position, that "to ascribe apolitical, universal values to certain kinds of music, notably German music, can be an intensely political gesture" (Ross, 2014). Yet this discussion assumes only a relationship between the composer and their work. Implicit in the public performance of art is the added relational dynamic between the performer and audience. To strive for a vacuum in which artistic output operates independently of the political, social and personal contexts of those involved is wilfully ignorant. For, in spite of its goal in fostering creativity and enhancing the power of art itself, we are left with the job of museum curators. This position echoes that of the Early music performer that Taruskin notes,

who “happily averred that, when making records...’I personally try to restrain all the people who work with me...I think it’s best to be minimal about your additions’...There is logic in this position, but it is the logic of certain death” (Taruskin, 1995, p. 95).

The music of Bach is not exempt from these concerns, notably regarding assertions that the libretto and orchestration of Bach’s *Passions* carry inherent anti-Semitic connotations. Ayana Haviv, a Jewish musician notes on a public post:

Tomorrow I begin rehearsals on Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, as I have done with countless *Passions*, and as always I am steeling myself for the isolation and alienation I always feel as a Jew singing this unquestionably anti-Semitic text of an equally unquestionable masterpiece (Haviv, 2020, para. 1).

The credibility of the suggested anti-Semitism of the music is not what will be discussed and has been debated on both sides elsewhere. However, the experience and emotions expressed by Haviv and other Jewish musicians are real, and the way this has played out in the reinterpretation of the music of Bach is cause for discussion. Taruskin makes a similar point in his 2008 lecture titled *Did Somebody Say Censorship?*:

The problem is not one of vindicating the work within its maker’s horizon of understanding...but rather one of reconciling the work to our own horizon of understand and to its potential contemporary import (Taruskin, 2008a, 11:03).

The first significant writing on anti-Semitism in the *Passion* of Bach was done so by Michael Marissen in 1998. Marissen, a Professor at Swarthmore College, was brought into the conversation when a number of students of the College’s chorus refused to sing in Bach’s *St.*

John Passion, arguing the work's anti-Semitism in its tale of Jewish demands for Jesus' crucifixion.

Shulamit Shapiro, a student of the College told the New York Times in 1995, "After I read the text, my heart told me I could never utter those words" ("Piece by Bach Stirs Debate in a Chorus", 1995, para. 1).

Those who find the *Passions* anti-Semitic, focus on the chorus of the Jews within the work (Haviv, 2022). Within the choruses, they note the aggressive, blood-hungry chorus of Jews who demand the death of Jesus. Witch-like voices or a shouting timbre often caricatures these choruses. The most poignant line is after Pilate washes his hands clean of the blood of Jesus, and the crowd of Jews answer, 'Sein Blut komme über uns und unsre Kinder' [His blood be on us and our children]. This text is from the Gospels, not Bach, and whilst reformed Christian theologians would argue that this line is symbolic of the blame of all humanity for the death of Christ, some Jews look at it more pointedly (Hensley, 2020). These turba choruses use diminished and minor chords and almost aggressive repetition of text.

Much of the anti-Semitic aspersions towards Bach result from his connection to the theologian Martin Luther, a proven anti-Semite. Luther's 1543 treatise "On the Jews and Their Lies" states that we should "set fire to their synagogues or schools" and urges that "safe conduct on the highways should be abolished completely for the Jews" (Luther, 1971, p. 270). Whilst nothing similar has been seen in the writings of Bach, it is hard to avoid the wide-sweeping brushstrokes that taint because of Luther's remarks.

Marissen offers a critical yet constructive path forward in his book *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion*. He begins by providing a hermeneutic analysis into the Gospel text and Bach's setting in music, and from this reading concludes that "fostering hostility to Jews is not the subject or purpose of Bach's interpretation of the Gospel's Passion narrative" (Marissen,

1998, p. 4). However, he continues arguing that this does not diminish the real experiences of those who see the work differently, and how music can trigger different responses as audiences encounter it throughout time. He is particularly critical of the view that music can be transcendental or universal. This view, which as discussed in this paper is one held by many, is in many ways ignorant of the contextual embeddedness of the work's original audience and how that audience has changed throughout time. This is Perl's goal, where music exists on a separate creative sphere. However, as Marissen notes, "Thinking that art should merely be beautiful or magnificent may help us to feel pleased by Bach's music, but it does not necessarily help much in understanding it" (1998, p. 5).

The solution he proposes is centred on critical commentary, whereby a clear and accurate translation and programme notes should be provided, so to convey the true intent of the text being delivered. He argues similarly that in the context of a liturgical presentation of the *Passions*, as rare as they may be, that the sermon serves a similar purpose in informing those listening. However, if a situation arises where programme notes or other similar content cannot be provided, then he suggests the removal or alternation of particularly problematic text and for this to then also "be acknowledged as such in the programme in order to avoid accusations of censorship." (Marissen, 1998, p. 6). This move in its very nature is an act of assumed co-authorship by way of inserting contemporary sensibilities into the performance of the *Passions* of Bach.

Taruskin comments on Marissen's point that to present a textual substitution "meaning favouring, in the case of conflict, the interests of the contemporary audience over the interests of the ancient, hallowed dead." (Taruskin, 2008a, 15:30). He continues that this requires a disregard of what he labels the "poietic fallacy", referring to the belief that the most important factor in assessing a work of art is the quality of the creator's contribution. By this logic, the effect that the

work has on the audience is irrelevant to its value, which Taruskin argues has promoted the concert of art as opposed to entertainment. Ross (2014) uses the example of Richard Strauss relationship with librettist Stefan Zweig, amidst the anti-Jewish legislation in Nazi Germany and Strauss' belief that his own behaviour was blameless. "‘Be a good boy, forget Moses,’ Strauss wrote to Zweig. But Zweig could not forget Moses" (Strauss & Zweig, 1975, p. 100).

Music critic Michael Steinberg, a German-born Jew who fled Germany in World War II as one of the *Kindertransport* child refugees, wrote this from listening to a 1941 recording of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* made at the Thomaskirche by Günther Ramin:

I no longer remember just what it was, but I think it must have been some extraneous noise in listening to this recording, like that of a page being turned or a bow hitting a music stand. Whatever it was, it suddenly awakened me to the fact that this was not just Bach coming from the speaker, but that these were sounds made by particular human beings; and these human beings were Germans in Leipzig, in March 1941, a year and a half into the war, with battles raging in North Africa, U-boat attacks in the Atlantic, London bombed nightly, concentration camps in operation. Were some of those singers and players members of the Nazi party? Did they wear swastika lapel pins? Had they used the so-called German greeting 'Heil Hitler,' when they arrived at the recording session, or did they still say, 'Guten tag'? Did they sign their letters with that same 'German greeting'? Having been so pulled powerfully, even violently, into the world of the *St. Matthew Passion*, I suddenly felt pushed out again, an outside, a non-Christian, a person who had been expelled from German life, culture and language, face to face with a work that had been composed solely 'to incite listeners to devotion,' in the words of Bach's contract with the city of Leipzig. (Steinberg, 2008, p. 6)

Steinberg's reflection highlights the flaw in Perl's argument that music can and should exist on a third plane, removed from politics and personal identity – the flaw being that music requires a vehicle to delivery, and more often than not something to deliver to. Music without this is simply an idea, and regardless of whether they see themselves as executants or interpreters, each musician and audience member is a product of their context, whether that be politically, socially, emotionally or spiritually. Therefore often-made claim that 'Bach is universal' is true only when that statement means nothing of substance at all. For a hat can be considered universal if its universal nature is defined by people's ongoing response to it across different time periods. Yet in the case of the music of Bach, the response to his *Passions* changes significantly over time, reflecting the cultural, political or social landscape which people live. This phenomenon is evident not only in the staged productions of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, but also has far broader application.

The film *Mein Herz schwimmt*, created as part of this research, aims to showcase the extensive and varying potential of interpreting Bach's music when the discussed framework, introduced by Taruskin, is applied. Having studied the context and interpretation of two stagings of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in this paper, the next significant question concerns my context and that of my colleagues. What is unique about the cultural moment we live in, and how does our interpretation of this music reflect this context? In making the film and its accompanying commentary, we explore how enacting a *Regietheater* model of co-authorship, where we diegetically transpose the religious world of the cantata into one centred on mental illness, tells a new story of our context, albeit through the same music.

It likely would have surprised Bach to discover that his cantata *Mein Herz schwimmt im Blut*, BWV 199, would be reinterpreted over three hundred years later through dance and film to depict a woman's struggle with a specific mental illness. Yet this signifies the universality of his

music, performed authentically within an artist's world and reflecting their context. The limiting factor is no longer the music itself, but the creative responses by artists to the work. As the world continues to evolve, we welcome new contexts and thus new interpretations of this music, making the music of Bach truly universal.

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