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## WSJ ARTICLE

## Bach's 'St. John Passion' Stirs Up Some


 By **BRETT CAMPBELL**  
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**O**regon Bach Festival music director Helmuth Rilling wanted to do something special to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach's death. Each summer for three decades, the Stuttgart conductor has presented the music of the festival's namesake to critical acclaim and burgeoning audiences. For this year's festival, Mr. Rilling decided to perform, for the first time in OBF history, all three of Bach's surviving choral-orchestral masterpieces.

That posed a problem for festival co-founder and Executive Director Royce Saltzman. No one could argue with two of the cornerstones of Western art, Bach's "Mass in B Minor" and "St. Matthew Passion." But the "St. John Passion" was another matter: Its anti-Semitic text had sparked protests in 1995, both here and at a performance at Swarthmore College. The demonstrations against the OBF's performance of the massive work had touched off the harshest discord in the festival's 30-year history. Critical letters peppered the Eugene newspapers. One local rabbi picketed the event, and another resigned from a festival planning committee in protest. Clearly, Mr. Saltzman had to figure out a way to deal with the controversy -- without censoring one of the great works of Western art or reopening old wounds.

The uproar stemmed from the anti-Semitic overtones in Martin Luther's translation of John's gospel, the biblical text upon which Bach based his two-hour masterpiece. The "Passion" re-enacts Christ's arrest and crucifixion, with the chorus (representing "the Jews") demanding his execution. Other gospels pin the blame for Christ's death not on the Jewish people collectively, but on that faction (called "the chief priests and Pharisees" or "the crowd") allied with the Roman rulers, whom Jesus and his disciples regarded as corrupt collaborators with an occupying force. Over the centuries,

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anti-Semites had cited John's inflammatory language as justification for pogroms and even the Holocaust.

As one of the world's leading music festivals, the OBF's response to this delicate situation had implications far beyond Eugene. Since 1970, the festival had blossomed into a three-week extravaganza of 55 concerts by world-class musicians, internationally acclaimed soloists (including bass baritone Thomas Quasthoff, who made his American debut here in 1995) and commissions of important new works by composers such as Arvo Part and Krzysztof Penderecki. With more than 30,000 listeners coming from all over the world, Mr. Saltzman had to handle the "St. John Passion" with sensitivity. His solution may serve as a model for how to handle such touchy issues.

Mr. Saltzman, a music professor at the University of Oregon (the Festival's sponsor) and former head of the International Federation for Choral Music, didn't want to omit or alter the "St. John." After all, plenty of history's masterworks have looked offensive to modern audiences. Should we be deprived of Shakespeare's Shylock? Or D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," one of the most influential films of all time, and one of the most rabidly racist? If Israel could, this year, finally abide performances of the notorious anti-Semite Richard Wagner, couldn't Oregon handle Bach?

As the First Amendment scholars say, the remedy for bad speech is more speech, and Mr. Saltzman saw "an opportunity for dialogue." In 1995 he had scrambled to defuse tensions by meeting with local rabbis and ministers, publishing essays and sponsoring public discussions about the "Passion" and anti-Semitism, sponsoring an interfaith service of reconciliation and presenting music composed by Jews in Nazi death camps. These efforts were favorably cited in a 1999 report on art and community commissioned by the Ford Foundation.

This time, Mr. Saltzman invited Swarthmore College professor Michael Marissen, author of the 1998 book "Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion," to give a public lecture. Mr. Marissen contended that, read in proper historical and theological context, Bach's "St. John Passion" "looks considerably less anti-Jewish than the Gospel text itself." And John's text, while frequently referring to "the Jews," might have been understood by its early readers to implicate only a few high priests, not all Jews, in Jesus's condemnation. Mr. Marissen showed that Bach's interpolated commentary on the gospel text reveals his clear message that all of us, especially Christians, are to blame for the Crucifixion. Bach, he said, "takes the focus away from the perfidy of 'the Jews' and onto the sins of Christian believers." Moreover, he noted that Bach's interpretation espouses "redemption of all the world."

Mr. Marissen also appeared on a well-attended panel discussion, along with Yitzhak Husbands-Hankin, the rabbi who'd resigned from the festival committee in 1995;

Occidental College professor-conductor Thomas Somerville, who'd taught a course on the controversy; and a local Christian minister who'd criticized the 1995 decision. The panelists agreed that even though portions of the text are certainly virulently anti-Semitic and that tension still troubled Jewish-Christian relations, censoring the "St. John" was probably a bad idea, and that it was a good thing that the festival was addressing the controversy head on.

A couple of audience members still objected to its inclusion on grounds that the text gave comfort to anti-Semites, but the prevailing sentiment seemed to be that it's better to talk about the issue than to sweep it under the rug. Although Mr. Rilling never addressed the controversy in his lecture-demonstrations, all told, the festival's efforts seemed to meet Mr. Husbands-Hankin's injunction to present the work in an educational context that "honors the moral responsibility of art." Only a few letters protesting the "St. John" appeared in the local press (though the festival did get one phone call spouting anti-Semitic sentiments, a reminder that Luther's venomous legacy lives on).

All of which left the spotlight on the festival's real triumph: luring 500-plus listeners in from the cool, sunny, Oregon summer afternoons to pay up to \$13 to hear a jeans-clad Mr. Rilling deliver his celebrated informal lecture-demonstrations explicating the "Passion's" intricate musical architecture, and to hear the work performed over four days. Thousands more attended the big choral concerts. Not only did almost all the "St. John" performances sell out, but this year's festival set records for ticket sales, attendance, diversity of audience and repertoire. Audiences warmly embraced top choirs from Uganda, Sweden, Cuba and Israel, which performed concerts of music from their countries -- including four new pieces commissioned by the festival -- and joined the OBF regulars in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

The festival's Composer's Symposium brought in the grand old maverick of American music, Lou Harrison, whose work has long incorporated sounds from various cultures, for teaching and performances of his works. Harvard scholar-performer Robert Levin's performances and role as artistic advisor began to address the OBF's principal shortcoming: its reluctance to adopt authentic Baroque instruments and tunings. Star soloist Mr. Quasthoff shone in a half-dozen concerts, ranging in repertoire from Bach to classical, romantic and impressionist styles, to an exuberant pops show in which he waddled across the stage in shades and sport shirt while performing a Sinatra tribute to a standing ovation.

The festival's embrace of international amity and diversity through music served as a worthy repudiation of St. John's divisive screeds. And the discussions about the "Passion," like the Pope's apology to the Jews last year, surely made many in this

overwhelmingly Gentile community recognize their own religion's role in millennia of bigotry and genocide. We are all of us sinners, we learned -- that's a memorial that Bach himself would have appreciated.

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