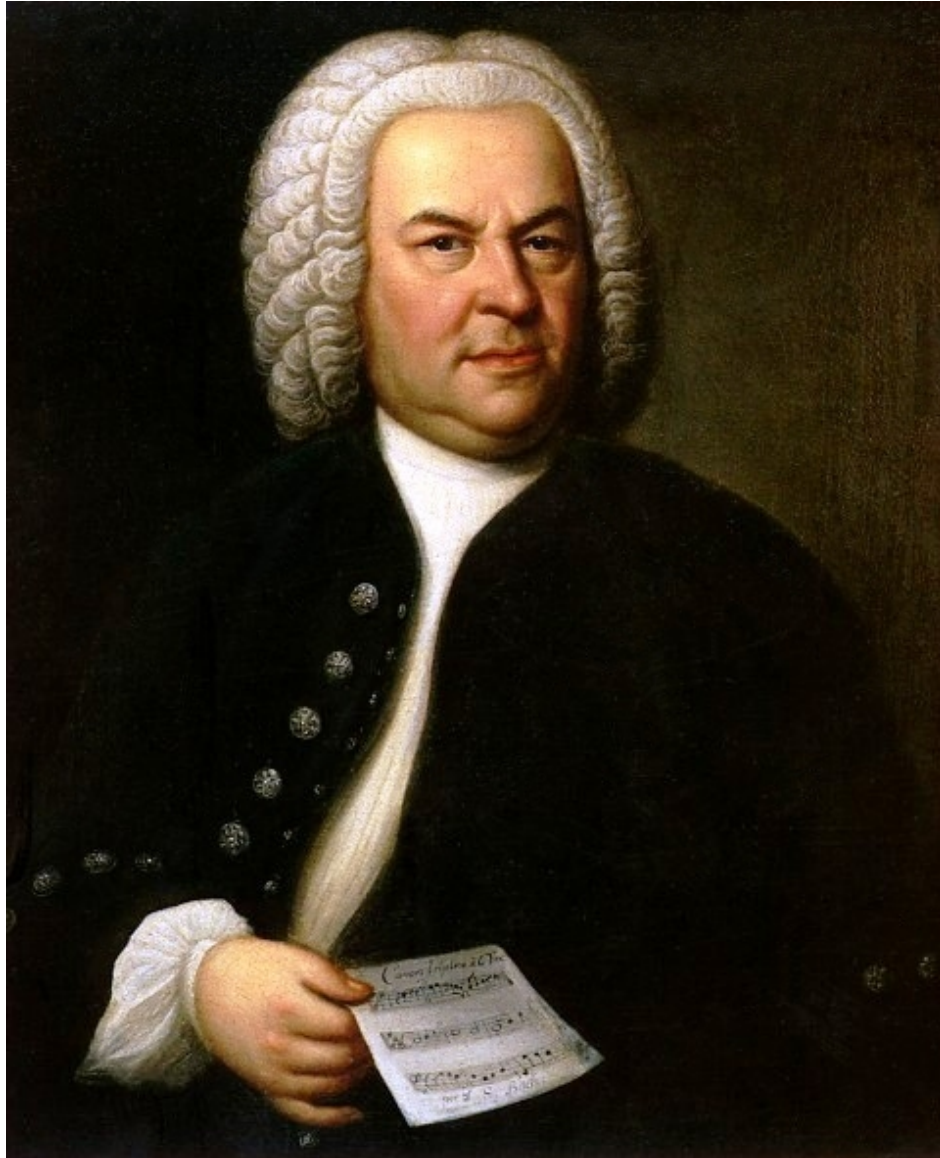


How Bach Set the Gospel to Music (A Book Review)



Johann Sebastian Bach, painted by Elias Gottlob Haussmann in 1748. Found on [Wikipedia](#)

Co-missioners,

This week we bring you a review of James Runcie's 2022 novel *The Great Passion*, which depicts Bach's composition of his *St. Matthew Passion* against a background colored by grief and loss.

The review is by another Matthew—in this case, Matt Metevelis, an ELCA pastor and chaplain in Las Vegas, Nevada, who has written many pieces for Thursday Theology, including [several other book reviews](#). In this review, Matt reveals how the art of Runcie’s novel communicates a vital message to “those of us who are trapped in the cycle of explaining what law and gospel preaching might be good for.”

And if you’d like to pair some watching and listening with your reading, we recommend this gorgeous [2019 rendition of the St. Matthew Passion by the Netherlands Bach Society](#).

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

P.S. Some who read this will recall [Chad Bird](#), a riveting presenter at our Crossings conference in 2020. We learned earlier this week that Chad’s son Luke lost his life in a hiking accident last Saturday. Luke, 21, was a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy. The accident happened in Chile where he was participating in a semester-abroad program at that country’s naval academy. May the promise of Christ that J.S. Bach underscored so profoundly in his music—see below—sustain Chad and all the family in their grief. So deep it must be. “Rest eternal grant him, O Lord; and let light perpetual shine upon him.”

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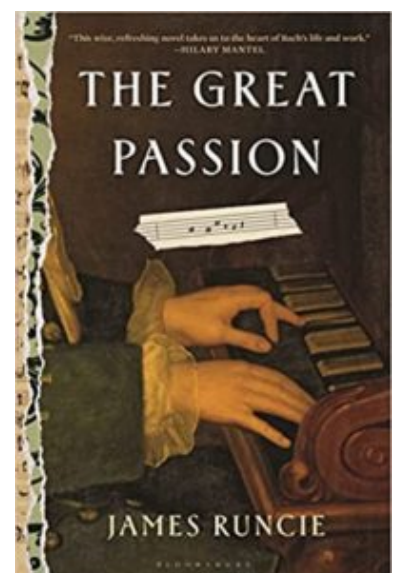
“The Notes are Always There”: How Bach Set the Gospel to Music

By Matthew Metevelis

A review of James Runcie’s *The Great Passion*
(New York, N.Y.: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022)

While exploring central London a few years ago I found my way to a house owned by George Frederic Handel. The Handel House Museum sits in an unassuming flat in the Mayfair neighborhood not far from Piccadilly Circus. The guitarist Jimi Hendrix lived there for a time too. For both of its famous occupants the building is a living tribute to the history of music. I took the last tour of the day and the dour, elderly, and exhausted guide took me from room to room and shared a simple description in a wry English accent. Upon walking into one room with some furniture and a fireplace he announced, "This is the practice room. The *Messiah* was probably heard for the very first time in this very place."

Some language must have a word for the awe you feel standing in an ordinary place. That would be the word for that moment. Music that had stirred preachers, brought kings to their feet, adorned so many other pieces of great culture, and that still fills concert halls every holiday season first entered the world in that room. I stopped, much to the annoyance of my guide, to try to imagine the musicians in that room and hear that music through the chasm of time.



[The Great Passion](#)

James Runcie's new novel afforded me a comparable delight. *The Great Passion* depicts 1720's Leipzig through the eyes of Stefan Silbermann, a young student at the school of the Thomaskirche. Stefan struggles to fit in as the new kid. The other kids mock his red hair. Another student views him as a rival and bullies him. Still reeling from the grief of his mother's death, he hates his new living arrangement, runs away from school, and finds himself taken in by the church's cantor—Johann Sebastian Bach.

These days we still listen to Bach's music but think of him as a figure encased in marble. *New Yorker* music critic Alex Ross described most people's image of Bach as one "who glowers at you from under his wig." The Bach that Stefan meets in *The Great Passion* is different. The busy cantor's personality is as mercurial as his music. He works long hours. He drives musicians crazy with his exacting attention to detail but always commands their love, admiration, and respect. He plays wildly with his children. He tells jokes. He nurses grudges and professional jealousies about his church job which is less grand than the lives of composers he knows who work at aristocratic courts. His family teases him for missing a call as a preacher as he is always spinning tiny sermons in epigrams and invocations of the glory of God in music. Bach is not a cipher for divine sounds as we might think of him but a human being like us in so many ways save his herculean dedication and attention to his art.

Stefan becomes our eyes into the tumult that is the Bach household too, famously full of children. We see the bustling energy of the children running around, we sit at the dinner tables full of good food and humor, and we hear the music of constant impromptu concerts that the Bach children put on. Stefan develops a close relationship with one of the Bach children and receives the maternal warmth he misses from Bach's wife, the singer Anna Magdalena. Runcie recreates this family

life in the midst of a fully rendered depiction of Leipzig in the eighteenth century. Our images for this time often overlook how dirty and diseased life then was. Merchant shops, dark alleys, drafty church rooms, and a public execution provide the settings for much of the story and a grim contrast for the warmth of the Bach household.



St Matthew Vox Christi found on [Wikipedia](#)

Runcie has the experiences and gifts to write historical fiction like this. His novels set in the 1950s were the basis of the British drama *Grantchester* with its crime-fighting vicar. But *Grantchester's* gifts exceed just invoking the past. The son of a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Runcie has a strong grasp on the Christian theology without which Bach's world and music would be unrecognizable. The entire novel turns on the composition of the *St. Matthew Passion* which Runcie depicts beyond its artistic merits in the gravity with which it addresses grief and death, sin and salvation.

Throughout the book, loss predominates. Stefan remembers losing his mother. The Bachs lose a very young daughter to plague and Anna Magdalena refuses to be comforted. Other losses among the characters lead to bleak despondency. Bach conceives the *Passion* as the way to "concentrate on what the story means at the same

time as telling it" (204). That meaning is the reality of the sin, suffering, evil, and loss that pervade our lives and through the cross now cling to Christ.

Bach explains his work as in essence a theodicy in song:

"We start with an invitation to mourn, to share the drama rather than simply listen to it. We help the congregation understand the inevitability of loss and sorrow. Other people raise their questions in books and sermons. We answer them in music" (205).

According to the story, the attempt to convey God's answer to suffering is a great success. At the first performance on Good Friday Stefan notes that the congregation, "could do nothing more important than listen because they had become part of it all." The impact becomes clear:

"We were all inadequate. We were all broken. And in that silence, we had to recognize the true horror of what had happened and acknowledge that we were complicit in the drama, simply by being the frail and flawed human beings that we are...

"I looked down at the congregation below and tried to imagine each and every one of their lives: the magistrate who worried that he was losing his mind; the blind man who spouted nonsense that rhymed; the society lady with the expensive hat; the alcoholic who wondering how long the service was going to last and when he could buy his next beer; the boy who had been David Stolle's last victim of bullying and whose voice had just broken; the child who had become an orphan last month and was not sure if anyone was going to take him in...

"I hoped the people realized that the music was so

much more than the story of Christ's death. It showed how he was the embodiment of all suffering that there had ever been and all that there was yet to come; the distillation of what it meant for our common humanity to be fragile, flawed and human across and outside time." (241-242)

Those of us who preach in Bach's Lutheran tradition would recognize the power of God's word at work on those people. The *Passion* in Stefan's ears is both law and gospel. All of the guilt and suffering he has just witnessed hangs with Christ on the cross. And as the work draws to a close Stefan confesses:

"I remember my mother and my grief and it seemed that all the suffering in the world was now being taken up in this music and lifted on Christ's shoulders; and that, after this, I would feel exhausted but inspired, cleansed from sin and grief, purified, elevated, and released from pain."
(244)

Many hearers have been blessed like Stefan in the centuries after. For those of us who are trapped in the cycle of



Thomas Kirche und
Schule 1723 found on
[Wikipedia](#)

explaining what law and gospel preaching might be good for, Stefan's powerful depiction captures what such preaching *does*. It draws us into the story. It makes us part of the story. People's pains are made present to Christ and Christ is made present to their pain. I couldn't help contrasting the richness of Bach's musical vision with the arid preaching and pastoral care of the Thomaskirche rector, Ernesti. A lover of books and wisdom, Ernesti comes off as a very well-meaning scold, handing out the gospel as a propositional truth and chiding people to accept their pain. Bach's music is an antidote to these cold admonitions in the warmth of its understanding and in the beauty of God's crucified answer to our painful questions.

God's word should always be preached like the best music—speaking to our depths while at the same time captivating us with love and power that is constantly reaching for us. Law and gospel preaching should always sing us into the drama of Christ's passion so that we can “do nothing more important than listen.”

The *St. Matthew Passion* is a work that my parents introduced me to as a child and one that I have loved ever since. I've seen it performed twice. When I first picked up this novel I was hoping for a dramatization of the program notes I have often read about the criticism Bach received for rendering scripture in such “operatic” tones. What I received was much better. Runcie's work provides a novelistic background to a profound musical reflection refracted through the life and witness of a man who knew the truth of a power higher than his art. Music comforts, enlivens, and inspires us because it is fundamentally outside of us. Chased but never possessed. Heard but never fully captured.

Music is like the gospel in that it comes from a place external to us to work deep within us. Our frailty is carried by Christ as a song that He sings too. As Runcie's Bach reminds young Stefan,

"Sometimes your faith might waver. With music, the notes are always there."

The Word of the Lord, spoken or sung, is always there too.

Matt Metevelis

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Chaplain, Nathan Adelson Hospice

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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