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The Passions of Bach

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Anthony Tommasini of *The New York Times* reviews two recent performances of Bach's "passions" — the presentations of "St. Matthew Passion" by the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) and of the "St. John Passion" by the choir of [Saint Thomas Church](#) on Fifth Avenue. In so doing, he makes some interesting observations about Johann Sebastian Bach worth noting:

Imagine how different the history of music might have been had Bach been interested in opera. Suppose that instead of heading to Leipzig, Germany, in 1723 to become the cantor at the St. Thomas Church, he had settled in Dresden, where audiences had an insatiable passion for Italian opera.

But Bach had a higher calling: composing music for the church. In a letter to the Leipzig town electors he promised church music that "shall not last too long" and "shall be of such a nature as not to make an operatic impression, but rather incite the listeners to devotion."

Well, Bach did not entirely adhere to those goals in two of his colossal masterpieces, the "St. John Passion" and the "St. Matthew Passion." Neither is remotely an opera. Instead, the story of Jesus' crucifixion is mostly told by the Evangelist, and the narrative is regularly interrupted with timeouts for ruminative arias and reflective chorales.

This is all true, of course. Bach was first and foremost a church musician whose faith and theology are inseparable from his music. As Mark Galli of [Christianity Today](#) noted a few years ago,

As one scholar put it, Bach the musician was indeed "a Christian who lived with the Bible." Besides being the baroque era's greatest organist and composer, and one of the most productive geniuses in the history of Western music, Bach was also a theologian who just happened to work with a keyboard . . .

In terms of pure music, Bach has become known as one who could combine the rhythm of French dances, the gracefulness of Italian song, and the intricacy of German counterpoint—all in one composition. In addition, Bach could write musical equivalents of verbal ideas, such as undulating a melody to represent the sea.

But music was never just music to Bach. Nearly three-fourths of his 1,000 compositions were written for use in worship. Between his musical genius, his devotion to Christ, and the effect of his music, he has come to be known in many circles as the "Fifth Evangelist."

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