

How Did J. S. Bach's "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben," BWV 244/49, Get to Be So Slow?

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It is a high point of almost every modern performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*: Between two thundering choruses that call for Jesus' crucifixion, across the dark and the stillness floats the ethereal soprano aria "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben," BWV 244/49, in its exquisite instrumentation of transverse flute and two oboes da caccia without basso continuo, and with its sense of time-stopping tragedy expressed in an aching slow arc.

There is a problem behind this movement connected with Bach's use of it with a different text. Wilhelm Rust discovered in the late nineteenth century that the *St. Matthew Passion* almost certainly shared music with a work Bach presented in March 1729 at the funeral of his former employer, the Prince of

Anhalt-Cöthen.¹ Bach and his librettist Christian Friedrich Henrici evidently reused the music of "Aus Liebe," composed in 1727 for the *St. Matthew Passion*, to set a most unexpected parody text for the funeral music two years later:

BWV 244/49
Aus Liebe,
Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben,
Von einer Sünde weiss er nichts.
Dass das ewige Verderben
Und die Strafe des Gerichts
Nicht auf meiner Seele bliebe.

(For love,
For love my savior would die;
He knows nothing of any sin.
So that eternal ruin
And the punishment of judgment
Might not remain upon my soul.)

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¹*Bach Gesellschaft* 20/2 (1873): viii–xii.

BWV 244a/12
Mit Freuden,
Mit Freuden sei die Welt verlassen,
Der Tod kommt mir recht tröstlich für.
Ich will meinen Gott umfassen,
Dieser hilft und bleibt bei mir,
Wenn sich Geist und Glieder scheiden.

(With joy,
With joy let the world be quitted;
Death is indeed comforting to me.
I would embrace my God,
Who helps and remains alongside me
When spirit and bodily members part.)

How was that possible? How could the second text ever have fit the music of the movement we recognize as an outpouring of grief? Not only does the affect of the new text appear to contradict that of the music, but there is a further puzzle in that for all the painful expressivity of “Aus Liebe,” its words are not especially affective. They are more doctrinal, theological, and abstract, treating the nature of Jesus’ self-sacrifice and its consequences for the believer—not entirely affect-neutral but not a poem of sorrow either.² Why did Bach inflect this text so affectively at all, turning this doctrinal statement into a moment of tragedy in the Passion?

This problem played a central role in a long debate over the priority of the *St. Matthew Passion* and the Cöthen Funeral Music—whether the occasional piece was a parody of the Passion setting, or vice versa. This, in turn, was a battleground in an ideologically inflected argument about distinctions between sacred and secular music and between competing views of Bach as either devoutly inspired or simply practical in the execution of his duties.³

If there are problems here—the apparent conflict between the music and the parody text, and the curious misalignment of the affective musical setting and the abstract original

text—they probably lie with us, not with Bach or Picander. We probably misunderstand this aria, and by “we” I mean the inheritors of a nineteenth-century performing tradition that made the movement what it is today: tragic, transcendent, and time-suspending. The publication and critical interpretation of the Passion in the second half of the nineteenth century established a particular view of the aria, and the legacy of recordings beginning in the early twentieth century cemented it in the collective interpretive consciousness. The present-day understanding of “Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben” is a product of the nineteenth century, and a surprisingly durable one.⁴ It is worth reconsidering, both for the interpretation of the aria in performance and for insight into Bach and Picander’s puzzling parody.

THE INTERPRETIVE HISTORY OF “AUS LIEBE”

Not every early writer on the *St. Matthew Passion* discussed “Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben,” possibly because some nineteenth-century performances of the oratorio omitted it. Those who did laid a particularly heavy burden of interpretation on it, making it a focus of the work however they construed it. The first detailed critical engagement with the aria—and with *St. Matthew Passion* altogether after its rediscovery in 1829—came in Johann Theodor Mosewius’s 1852 study in which he set the tone for the aria’s reception and interpretation.⁵ Mosewius cites the highest ideals of inner expression in discussing the movement:

A solo flute playing the leading melody is joined in the accompaniment by two oboes da caccia. The bass is entirely silent. The key is A minor, the meter 3/4. The supporting lines are sustained organlike, the upper line in an expressive, succinctly speaking

²Elke Axmacher argued that its perspective sums up the early-eighteenth-century Lutheran understanding of the Passion story altogether. “Aus Liebe will mein Heyland sterben”: *Untersuchungen zum Wandel des Passionsverständnisses im frühen 18. Jahrhundert*, 2nd edn. (Stuttgart: Carus, 2005).

³The history of the debate is summarized in Daniel R. Melamed, *Hearing Bach’s Passions*, revised edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 100–04.

⁴Thiemo Wind did note and question the modern tendency to perform the aria as a lament for Jesus. He argued that its text is positive in outlook and saw the parody text “Mit Freuden” as pointing to a similarly positive interpretation of the Passion version. He speculated that the origin of the slow interpretation lay in the Romantic era but did not investigate the matter. “‘Aus Liebe’—Mit Freuden. Zu einer neuen Interpretation von Bachs Arie aus der *Matthäus-Passion*,” *Tibia* 26 (2001): 353–62.

⁵Johann Theodor Mosewius, *Johann Sebastian Bach’s Matthäus-Passion musikalisch-aesthetisch dargestellt* (Berlin: Guttentag, 1852), 56.

melody, decorated with suspensions, in that Bachian manner when he touches his sacred harp with a moved breast, and the notes pour forth from it, warm with life, and crystallize in forms. What a difference between artificial melodies and this profound, artful and yet simply speaking configuration, conceived and perceived in the spirit of the singularity of the delicate instrument, expressing in gentle tones all the compassion, all the pain, all the blessedness of innocence, of the purest consciousness, as only fantasy can convey in gentlest breath. Here there is not a hint of anything external; one must engage oneself completely with music like this; one must seek out and explore its atmospheric mood, in which, I might almost say, such musical still-life paintings are opened up to our inner feelings, and where the emotions can attain true inner understanding. Once this is allowed to happen, once the core of deep poetry hidden within is revealed, and flows into the realm of senses and feelings, then one returns to it again and again, with ever greater joy and pleasure. No labor is required for this, but rather practice, a spiritual and total dedication of sentiment and thought.⁶

Mosewius urges complete engagement with the music—surrender, even—and invokes the static quality of a still-life painting. Earlier he twice refers to the movement as “ein lyrischer

“Eine melodie-führende Soloflöte tritt den zwei Jagd-Oboen in der Begleitung bei. Der Bass schweigt gänzlich. Die Tonart ist A-moll, der Takt 3/4. Die Grundstimmen orgelartig getragen, die Oberstimme in ausdrucksvoller, mit Vorhalten geschmückter, prägnant sprechender Melodie in Bachischer Weise, wenn er sein heiliges Saitenspiel mit bewegter Brust rührt, und die Töne lebenswarm aus ihr hervorquellend sich in Formen krystallisieren. Welch ein Unterschied der erfundenen Melodien von diesen tiefsinnig kunstreichen und doch einfältig sprechenden Gestaltungen, gedacht und empfunden im Geiste der Eigenthümlichkeit des zarten Instruments, aussprechend in milden Tönen alles Mitleid, allen Schmerz, alle Seligkeit der Unschuld, des reinsten Bewusstseins, wie sie nur die Phantasie den zartesten Hauchen mittheilen kann. Es ist daran kaum etwas Aeusseres anzudeuten, man muss sich in dergleichen Tonstücke hineinleben, die Stimmung aufsuchen und benutzen, in welcher sich solche, ich möchte fast sagen, musikalische Stilleben dem Gemüthe erschliessen, in welchem sie Boden für die Feststellung im Innern des Menschen finden. Haben sie sich nur einmal seiner bemächtigt, ist der Kern der tiefen Poesie, welche sie bergen, erkannt und der Empfindung zugeströmt, dann kehrt man gern und immer wieder mit erhöhter Freude und wachsendem Genügen dahin zurück. — Es ist keine Arbeit dazu erforderlich, aber Thätigkeit, geistige und gänzliche Hingebung des Gefühls und der Gedanken.” Part of this translation adopted from Martin Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work*, trans. John Hargraves (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), 411.

Erguss”—a lyrical outpouring—emphasizing an affective and personal character, and in this passage he twice calls the aria’s obbligato flute line “sprechend”—speaking. The near complete focus on the obbligato flute line at the expense of the vocal material and its characterization as musical speech resonate with Wagnerian views of the “capacity of speech” of instrumental music.⁷ That capacity, of course, was associated with the expression of inner feeling.

Alfred Heuss, writing in 1909, was drawn to the bassetto scoring of the aria, without bass-range continuo. This is a feature for which everyone has a slightly different explanation; for Heuss it is the starting point for an understanding of the aria, sounding as if from on high,⁸ as transcendent:

A bass is lacking, because all earthly burden has here ceased; the piece soars over the earth, and one can imagine that it is sung from on high, as from a cupola like many choruses in Wagner’s *Parsifal*. Did Bach have in mind the image of the dove? This almost seems to be most likely, and was certainly in the realm of Bach’s imagination. To the two oboes of the short prelude is unexpectedly added the flute, as if a dove had also flown in and tarried over the whole. Even the recitative leads thought to Galilee, and that is where the baptism took place.⁹ . . .

Bach has placed this ineffably pure, transcendent image in the middle of this gruesome, agitated context; one needs the kind of fantasy that can imagine the transcendent to appreciate it. Precisely at this place one is reminded of old mystery plays that put heaven, earth and hell on the stage, here once again

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⁷See, for example, part 5 of Wagner’s “Oper und Drama” (1851).

⁸Themes of weightlessness have continued to figure in the work’s interpretation. The aria’s spare scoring (“singularly delicate” in Macfarren’s words) and tessitura prompt many images of height—both Charles Sanford Terry and C. Hubert H. Parry, continuing the nineteenth-century interpretive tradition, wrote that the aria “seems to hover in the air,” and Terry added that “the Flute weaves a melody which falls to earth like a lark’s song.” (Here we can recall the dove in Heuss’s interpretation.) Charles Sanford Terry, *Bach: The Passions: Book II:1729–31* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 53; C. Hubert H. Parry, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Story of the Development of a Great Personality* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1909), 275.

⁹Heuss apparently seeks to connect his interpretation of the aria with the Galilee, where the miracles alluded to in the preceding *accompanato* and Jesus’ baptism were understood as having taken place.

brought to life in infinite refinement with the resources of the immaterial art of music. Moments like this show what a Bach Passion offers to such subjects over drama proper; it has the transcendent at its disposal as well.¹⁰

The explicit Wagnerian reference is striking—he hears it essentially as Grail Music—but Heuss's focus on the transcendent both in the aria (which he earlier calls "immateriell")¹¹ and in the *St. Matthew Passion* as a whole points to a view of this aria as something above and apart from the rest of the setting.

Transcendence, elevation above the earth, a lyrical outpouring, a speaking melodic line—these are the terms in which commentators in the long nineteenth century wrote of "Aus Liebe." And they are also the characteristic features of that century's elevation of the slow movement to the highest aesthetic level, a phenomenon Margaret Notley has called "the cult of the Classical Adagio" in chamber music. For example, she quotes Hector Berlioz, writing in 1862 of Beethoven's adagios, in language that resonates with that of Mosewius and Heuss on "Aus Liebe": "There are no human passions, no more earthly images, no innocent songs, no tender whispering; there no sparks of wit flash, no humor bubbles over . . . he stands exalted above humankind and has forgotten it! Removed from the earthly sphere, he hovers

¹⁰"Ein Bass fehlt, denn alle Erdschwere hat hier aufgehört; das Stück schwebt über der Erde, un man könnte sich vorstellen, dass es aus der Höhe gesungen würde, etwa aus einer Kuppel wie manche Chöre in Wagners 'Parsifal.' Ob Bach das Bild mit der Taube vorgeschwebt hat? Fast scheint dies das Nächstliegende zu sein, lag auch sicher in Bachs Phantasiekreis. Zu den beiden Oboen des kleinen Vorspiels ist ganz unvermutet die Flöte gekommen, gleichsam wie eine Taube hinzugeflogen, und weilt nun über dem Ganzen. Auch das Rezitative führte in Gedanken nach Galiläa, und dort fand ja die Taufe statt. . . . Dieses unsagbar reine, übersinnliche Bild hat Bach mitten in diese grausige, aufgeregte Umgebung gestellt; hier kommt man auch einzig mit der Phantasie, die sich Übersinnliches vorzustellen vermag, aus. Gerade an solchen Stellen wird man an die alten Mysterien erinnert, die Himmel, Erde und Hölle auf die Bühne stellten, was hier in unendlicher Verfeinerung mit den Mitteln der immateriellsten Kunst, der Musik, wider auflebt. Es zeigt sich an derartigen Stellen, was gerade die Bachsche Passion bei solchen Stoffen noch über das eigentliche Drama stellt; sie verfügt auch über die Mittel des Übersinnlichen." Alfred Heuss, *Johann Sebastian Bachs Matthäuspassion* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1909), 129–32.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 19.

alone and peaceful in the ether."¹² "Aus Liebe" appears to have become the *St. Matthew Passion's* slow movement. The aria's solo voice, intimate chamber scoring, endless spun-out melody, and sacred topic seem to have led nineteenth-century interpreters to hear it as a parallel to the kind of instrumental slow movement that was so highly valued, especially the type that imitated vocal music. This view would have required a very slow tempo, or perhaps a tradition of slow performances prompted the analogy to the instrumental adagio. Either way, the language of the work's nineteenth-century critical reception points clearly to an understanding of the aria as a piece that communicated in the manner of an instrumental slow movement.

Heuss's view of the aria as transcendent went together with his characterization of it as dispassionate, or perhaps beyond passion. ("Seldom did Bach write something more dispassionate [*leidenschaftsloser*] and more transfigured than this aria composed in the gentle, guiltless A minor."¹³) And this characterization reflects a broad uncertainty about the precise sentiment expressed in the aria and of its affective character. This can be seen in the comments of George Macfarren, writing in 1870 in an essay reprinted as the widely circulated preface to Novello's *Passion* edition the following year.¹⁴ He was among the first to point to the possibility that the aria expresses dual affects, calling it a piece in which "exultation shines through even the regret with which this [Jesus' death out of love] is avowed—a sunbeam upon the tears."¹⁵ Even Albert Schweitzer, in 1905, was not sure about the movement's tone: "How Bach wished the aria to be performed is doubtful. Should it be sung tranquilly and radiantly, or more like a rhapsody, with a certain

¹²Margaret Notley, "Late-Nineteenth-Century Chamber Music and the Cult of the Classical Adagio," this journal 23 (1999): 33–61; Hector Berlioz quoted on 35–36.

¹³"Nicht oft hat auch Bach etwas Leidenschaftsloseres und dabei Verklärteres geschrieben, wie diese in dem weichen, unschuldigen A moll geschriebene Arie," Heuss, *Bachs Matthäuspassion*, 129.

¹⁴George Macfarren, "Bach's Grosse Passions-Musik (St. Matthew)," *Musical Times* 14 (1870): 327–29, 359–61, 391–93; 423–26.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 425.

pathos in the declamation?"¹⁶ This is a continuing critical tradition; Isabella van Elferen and Markus Rathey, for example, each point to simultaneous joy and sorrow expressed in the text.¹⁷

But for most writers, beginning in the nineteenth century, the sorrowful won out. Of the whole Passion setting Macfarren wrote, for example, "'He suffered and was buried' is the entire subject of the work, in the embodiment of which no tones but of sadness could appropriately be employed, since no feeling but of grief was to be illustrated," reflecting a broad nineteenth-century understanding of Bach's Passion settings as purely tragic works. This view of the aria has persisted; a century later, Emil Platen wrote that the aria "combines a feeling of inner resignation with painful melancholy," leaving little room for doubt.¹⁸

The aria has also come to be regarded as structurally central to the *St. Matthew Passion*, and this may also have contributed to its interpretation as tragic. Friedrich Smend argued that the work's "trial scene" literally centers around "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben," and that the section of the Passion that includes it is the "Herzstück" of the entire composition.¹⁹ This way of looking at the Passion's structure has been influential; Eric Chafe, for example, embraces it as almost axiomatic.²⁰ To

the extent that modern views echo Macfarren's in regarding the entire Passion as tragic, it is easy to see how the aria would be regarded as necessarily slow in keeping with its role in the work overall.

The place of "Aus Liebe" between repetitions of the chorus "Lass ihn kreuzigen" has figured strongly in its interpretation as well. Schweitzer called the aria and preceding *accompanato* a "point of repose," and this theme has been expanded more recently by John Butt. For him, the aria implies "the slowing-down of the sense of time and might even take one into a different consciousness of time altogether," and he further suggests that it "stretches out the subjective time of the listener."²¹ It is not difficult to see that this sort of interpretation would go hand in hand with a very slow tempo—a stretching of objective time. This is an interpretation that almost certainly stems from a performing tradition of "Aus Liebe" as a slow piece.

EARLIEST CONCERT PERFORMANCES AND PUBLISHED SCORES

The nineteenth century's first performances do not appear to have taken this view. Felix Mendelssohn and the Berlin Sing-Akademie omitted "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben" from the *St. Matthew Passion*'s first concert performance in 1829; it is among the ten arias and four *accompanatos* cut for length, theology, poetic taste, or musical considerations. It was subsequently restored in Mendelssohn's 1841 Leipzig performance, though apparently without its final *ritornello*. We do not know precisely what tempo Mendelssohn adopted for the aria, but he labeled the movement "Andante" both in his score and in the performing parts, a marking that for him did not specify an especially slow tempo, to judge from his use of the term in other movements of the *St. Matthew Passion*.²²

¹⁶Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, vol. II, trans. Ernest Newman (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 228.

¹⁷Isabella van Elferen, *Mystical Love in the German Baroque: Theology, Poetry, Music*, Contextual Bach Studies 2 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 288ff.; Markus Rathey, *Bach's Major Vocal Works: Music, Drama, Liturgy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 125ff.

¹⁸Macfarren, "Bach's Grosse Passions-Musik (St. Matthew)," 359. "Die Grundstimmung der Arie verbindet ein Gefühl inniger Zuneigung mit schmerzlicher Wehmut." Emil Platen, *Die Matthäus-Passion von Johann Sebastian Bach. Entstehung, Werkbeschreibung, Rezeption* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1991), 187. This appears to be the continuing understanding of the movement, a tendency illustrated by the aria's inclusion in a recorded anthology of *Top 30 Funeral Classics* (digital compilation, Brilliant Classics, 2015).

¹⁹"Aus Liebe," in Smend's view, fulfills the same axial role as "Durch dein Gefängnis, Gottes Sohn" in the *St. John Passion* BWV 245. Friedrich Smend, "Bachs Matthäus-Passion," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 25 (1928): 33.

²⁰Eric Chafe, *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 243n.15. Elke Axmacher's view ("Aus Liebe will mein Heyland sterben") that this aria

encapsulates the era's outlook on the Passion story emphasizes its centrality in another sense as well.

²¹John Butt, *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 136–37.

²²I am grateful to Peter Ward Jones for confirming Mendelssohn's tempo marking. On Mendelssohn's

Table 1
Principal published scores of the *St. Matthew Passion*

DATE	PUBLISHER	MARKING IN “AUS LIEBE”	NOTES
1830	Schlesinger	--	[ed. A. B. Marx]
1843	Schlesinger	--	ed. M. Bourges; piano/vocal
1854	BG 4	--	ed. J. Rietz
1856	Bote & Bock	--	ed. D. F. E. Wilsing
1862	Novello	Largo patetico	ed. W. Sterndale Bennett
1862	Leuckart	Andante espressivo	ed. R. Franz [selected arias]
1863	Peters	--	ed. J. Stern; piano/vocal
1867	Breitkopf & Härtel	Andante espressivo ♩ = 88	ed. R. Franz [arranged]
1869	Ditson	Andante espressivo ♩ = 104	based on Peters and B&H
1874	Enoch	Andante espressivo	ed. C. Bannelier; piano/vocal
1894	Schirmer	Largo patetico	ed. H. W. Nicholl
1897	Lemoine	Andantino affettuoso ♩ = 44	ed. F. A. Gevaert; piano/vocal
1900	Eulenberg	--	ed. G. Schumann
1904	Universal	--	ed. J. Vockner; piano/vocal
1910	Stainer & Bell	--	ed. C. Stanford
1911	Novello	Largo patetico	ed. E. Elgar/I. Atkins; piano/vocal
1925	Gerdes	--	ed. F. W. Franke; piano/vocal
1929	Peters	---	ed. S. Ochs
1935	Breitkopf & Härtel	--	ed. M. Schneider

Bach’s autograph score and original performing materials include no affect or tempo marking for “Aus Liebe,” and none of the earliest editions based on them—Schlesinger (full score 1830, piano/vocal score 1843), Bach Gesellschaft (1854), or Bote & Bock (1856)—add one. (See Table 1.) But two influential publications in the 1860s did provide suggestions, codifying slow tempos. Novello’s 1862 edition by William Sterndale Bennett labeled the aria

“Largo patetico,” a designation perpetuated in reprints by Novello (1871 and 1911) and in the G. Schirmer edition (1894). Leuckart’s 1862 edition of the aria by Robert Franz and Breitkopf & Härtel’s 1867 edition of his arrangement of the entire Passion headed the movement “Andante espressivo,” and the complete score added a metronome mark of ♩ = 88. The 1869 edition by Ditson adopted Franz’s expression marks, including “Andante espressivo” for this aria, suggesting a tempo of ♩ = 104 that is quicker but still slow. An 1897 edition of the Passion by Lemoine labels the aria “Andantino affettuoso” and adopts Franz’s metronome marking, though it notates it as ♩ = 44.

Franz’s “Andante espressivo” explicitly emphasized an expressive aspect of the aria. Novello’s “Largo patetico” also suggests a very slow tempo, and both point to the beloved adagio type. Novello’s modifier “patetico,” encountered occasionally in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scores, always in minor-key movements, appears to have carried special significance. Muzio Clementi’s Sonata,

performances, see Martin Geck, *Die Wiederentdeckung der Matthäuspassion im 19. Jahrhundert. Die zeitgenössischen Dokumente und ihre ideengeschichtliche Deutung* (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse, 1967); Barbara David Wright, *Johann Sebastian Bach’s Matthäus-Passion: A Performance History, 1829–1854* (Ph.D. diss. University of Michigan, 1983); Jeffrey Sposato, *The Price of Assimilation: Felix Mendelssohn and the Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); *Matthäus-Passion: in den Versionen von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Berlin 1829 und Leipzig 1841*, ed. Klaus Winkler (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2014); Peter Ward Jones, “Mendelssohn’s Performances of the ‘Matthäus-Passion’: Considerations of the Documentary Evidence,” *Music & Letters* 97/3 (2016): 409–64. The suggestion in earlier literature that only the ritornello of “Aus Liebe” was performed appears to be a misreading of the sources.

op. 50, no. 5 (1821), for example, a narrative work labeled "Didone abbandonata—Scena tragica," begins with an Introduzione marked "Largo patetico e sostenuto." His *Gradus ad Parnassum* No. 39 (1817–26) is called "Scena patetica" and is marked "Adagio con grand'espressione." Nineteenth-century writers surely also had Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata, op. 13, in mind as well in using the word "patetico," which appears to have conveyed great seriousness and perhaps even tragedy. These nineteenth-century scores of the passion and their tempo and affect markings document a serious and somber view of the aria, and codified that view in the musical text.²³

Except for a Novello reprint in 1911 that retained "Largo patetico," though, editions of "Aus Liebe" published from 1900 on returned to the original lack of a tempo or affect marking, including those by Eulenberg, Universal, Stainer & Bell, and Breitkopf & Härtel.²⁴ But I suspect that the performing tradition of the aria was well established by then, despite the return to the neutrality of the original sources. The view of "Aus Liebe" as slow and expressive was established during the period of the *St. Matthew Passion*'s wide dissemination and performance, its interpretation in criticism, its publication in influential editions, and its elevation to the status of a musical monument, all in the second half of the nineteenth century. Although this view was expressed in various ways, there appears to have been broad consensus on the fundamental character of the aria.

THE RECORDED TRADITION

Recordings of "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben" began in 1927 with an individual performance directed by Karl Alwin and sung by Elisabeth Schumann. As it happens, this is one of the fastest performances in the recorded history of the aria, but the tempo and timing were

probably influenced by its issue on a twelve-inch 78 rpm record, and might not reflect the usual interpretation of the piece at the time. The duration of 4:22 pushes the practical limit of a single gramophone side, and the recording's tempo may well have been chosen to fit the aria in. (The B side is a soprano arrangement of the bass aria "Es ist vollbracht," BWV 159/4, which at 4:35 is also the fastest recording of this movement until 1999, probably also to make it fit.)

Most early recordings of "Aus Liebe" are a lot slower, suggesting that Alwin and Schumann's 1927 performance was unusual in its relatively quick tempo and providing support for the idea that their tempo was determined by recording technology. I have surveyed seventy-seven recordings of the complete *St. Matthew Passion* released commercially since then; their timings are listed in Table 2 and charted in figure 1.²⁵ Metronome numbers cited for individual recordings are measured from the recordings (not calculated), using the opening ritornello and not accounting for variations of tempo within a performance. The solid horizontal lines represent the hypothetical timings corresponding to metronome markings and assume no extra time for the fermatas; performances at those tempos would typically be somewhat longer (that is, the lines moved up on the graph) allowing for time for fermatas.

Most performances from 1927 to the present day last between 4:20 and 6:00, timings that typically result from metronome numbers of approximately ♩ = 58 to ♩ = 41. (See Table 3, which includes links to excerpts from recordings discussed here.) This is a significant spread that encompasses the two tempos suggested in editions issued in the 1860s, with some performances that are even slower than Franz's ♩ = 88 and some (particularly in recent years) faster than Stern's ♩ = 104. Of the early recordings issued on 78s, several were live performances and broadcasts, so we can be

²³See Derek Carew, *The Mechanical Muse: The Piano, Pianism and Piano Music, c. 1760–1850* (London: Ashgate, 2007), 159–63.

²⁴Eulenberg (1900, ed. Georg Schumann), Universal (1904), Stainer & Bell (1910, ed. Charles Stanford) and Breitkopf & Härtel (1935, ed. Max Schneider).

²⁵I have used timings rather than metronome numbers because they take into account features other than tempo that contribute to the perceived slowness of a performance, especially the many fermatas often rendered with *ral-lantandos*, holds, and following silences.

Table 2
Timings of recordings of “Aus Liebe” consulted (shortest to longest)

2006	Jacobs	3:40	2012	Biller	5:00
1995	Neuhold	4:18	1954	Grossmann	5:02
2009	Malgoire	4:18	2014	Egarr	5:02
1970	Mauersberger	4:19	1992	Leusink	5:03
1927	Alwin	4:22	2006	Biller	5:03
1958	Richter	4:26	1981	Kuentz	5:04
1987	Solti	4:26	1997	Ozawa	5:04
1963	Ericson	4:27	1953	MacMillan	5:05
1970	Harnoncourt	4:31	1997	van Veldhoven	5:05
1989	Leonhardt	4:32	1997	Abbado	5:06
1994	Ericson	4:32	1994	Goodwin	5:10
1947	Jacques	4:34	1979	Willcocks	5:11
1982	Corboz	4:35	2008	Dijkstra	5:13
2007	Butt	4:35	1988	Gardiner	5:14
2005	Müller-Brühl	4:39	1954	Furtwängler	5:15
2009	Chailly	4:39	1972	Steinitz	5:16
1961	Klemperer	4:41	1950	von Karajan	5:17
1994	Cleobury	4:42	1968	Gönnenwein	5:17
1995	Max	4:42	1976	Sándor	5:19
1996	Brüggen	4:42	1969	Richter	5:20
1998	Herreweghe	4:43	1984	Herreweghe	5:20
2009	Skidmore	4:43	1999	Suzuki	5:20
2000	Harnoncourt	4:45	1967	van Egmond	5:21
1993	Oberfrank	4:46	1935	Weisbach	5:23
2009	Kuijken	4:47	1949	Lehmann	5:25
2010	van Veldhoven	4:47	1962	Bernstein	5:28
1984	Schreier	4:48	1985	Harnoncourt	5:30
1969	Abbado	4:49	1972	von Karajan	5:32
2015	Seymour	4:51	1971	Richter	5:34
1962	Böhm	4:52	1958	Vaughan Williams	5:38
1953	Scherchen	4:54	1939	Mengelberg	5:44
1996	Thomas	4:54	1959	Wöldike	5:47
2002	McCreesh	4:54	1965	Jochum	5:48
1952	Ramin	4:55	2010	Rattle	5:51
2005	Koopman	4:55	1960	Shaw	5:54
1941	Ramin	4:58 ^a	1978	Rilling	5:58
2016	Bernius	4:58	1942	Kittel	6:02 ^b
1994	Rilling	4:59	1937	Koussevitzky	6:07
2006	Lutz	4:59			

^aThe aria and preceding accompagnato are fitted onto one 78RPM side, and the aria’s closing ritornello cut. This hypothetical timing adds the duration of the opening ritornello.

^bSpeed adjusted to c. A440.

confident that the timings of their numbers were not constrained by the capacity of a gramophone side. The 1947–48 recording by Reginald Jacques is an exception as a studio recording, and its quick tempo (like that of the

1927 Alwin/Schumann recording) may well have been chosen to fit the aria on one side.²⁶

²⁶I have not been able to consult the 78 rpm version to confirm this.

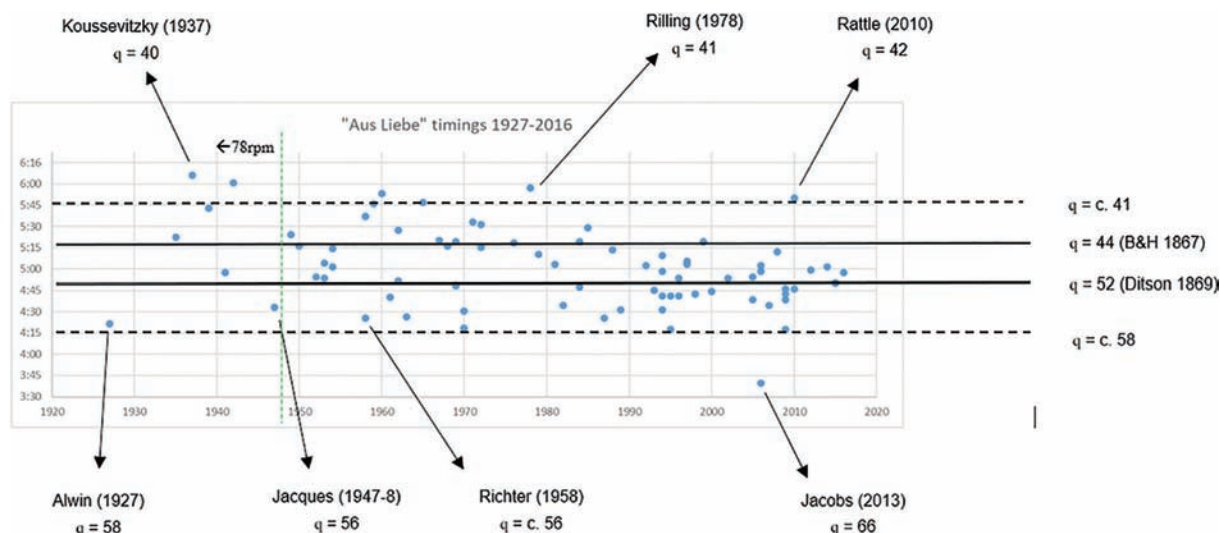


Figure 1: Recordings of "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben" by date and timing.

Table 3
Selected recordings of "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben"
(Please see the online version of the journal for recorded examples.)

RECORDING	CONDUCTOR	TIME	TEMPO
First recording	Alwin (1927)	4:22	MM ♩ = 58
Slowest tempo	Koussevitzky (1937)	6:07	MM ♩ = 40
Typical slow tempo	Jochum (1965)	5:48	MM ♩ = 41
R. Franz's tempo (Breitkopf 1867)	von Karajan (1972)	5:32	MM ♩ = 44
Typical modern tempo	Suzuki (1999)	5:20	MM ♩ = 46
J. Stern's tempo (Peters 1863)	Scherchen (1953)	4:54	MM ♩ = 52
Typical fast tempo	Mauersberger (1970)	4:19	MM ♩ = 58
Fastest tempo	Jacobs (2006)	3:40	MM ♩ = 66

That makes Karl Richter's 1958 performance the oldest that is faster than the tempos specified in nineteenth-century editions; all the earlier recordings definitely not constrained by technology are at that tempo or slower, suggesting the persistence of the nineteenth-century view of the aria.

Recent recordings have tended to fall in the faster part of the range, perhaps reflecting the tendency of historically oriented performances to take quicker tempos in general. In fact only one recording since Helmut Rilling's 1978

version has been as slow as the historically slowest tempos, and it may be significant that it is Peter Sellars's and Simon Rattle's "ritualized" version in which a sense of personal tragedy appears to be the explicit goal of a scene staged as a sort of deathbed tableau for Jesus.²⁷

The tempos suggested by the nineteenth-century editions appear to have been influential into the twentieth century. The great

²⁷<https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/16913> (Part 2, 41:49).

majority of recordings is close to the suggested metronome markings or slower (though some, particularly in recent years, are faster). And although most recent recordings cluster around the faster of the two nineteenth-century editorial suggestions, they are mostly continuous with the inherited tradition of “Aus Liebe” as a slow and serious piece.

Arrangements of the aria have also tended to regard it that way. The extreme case is probably a piano transcription by Émile Naoumoff, who follows in the footsteps of the two- and four-hand arrangements of the work first published in 1870. One filmed performance (ca. 1999) lasts an astonishing 6:34 at a metronome mark of $\text{♩} = 38$.²⁸ Similar in regarding “Aus Liebe” as a very deliberate piece is a symphonic metal arrangement (2013) by the ensemble Molllust, whose reworking points to a significant feature of the modern understanding of this aria.²⁹ The band juxtaposes a slow and tranquil rendition of the original aria, arranged for voice and keyboard, with metal-style statements of “Kreuzige ihn.” Those words are from John’s Gospel, not Matthew’s, and the musical reference is to Bach’s *St. John Passion*, not the *St. Matthew*, probably because this text fits the band’s evident purpose better than the quasi-passive “Lass ihn kreuzigen” in Matthew’s text. But the contrast between the words “Aus Liebe” and the crucifixion interjections echoes much of the history of commentary on Bach’s work, in which the framing of this delicate aria by the paired crucifixion choruses is seen as significant and helps define the character of the aria. These arrangements of the aria are readings of the received performance tradition of the work.

Commentators almost always cite the difference in the movements’ scorings—tutti forces (with the two ensembles mostly in unison) in the choruses and minimal forces without continuo in the aria. This contrast has become more extreme in the history of the work’s performance. In Bach’s presentations there was an undeniable contrast between the aria’s delicate scoring and the

tutti rendition of the crucifixion choruses by some forty-odd performers. But modern choral/orchestral renditions of the *Passion* scale the choruses up to the full complement of voices and instruments, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, even though the aria remains a movement for four performers no matter the total size of the ensemble. The two “Lass ihn kreuzigen” movements thus tower ever higher over the aria in modern renditions—which are, of course, another legacy of the nineteenth century and the work’s revival under Mendelssohn, whose 1829 performance used soloists, 158 choristers, and some 50 instrumentalists.³⁰

And with the unfortunate tendency of performances of the choral movements to be fast, loud, and ferocious (often with disturbing anti-Jewish implications), there may well be pressure for “Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben” to be even quieter and slower, and to suggest the purity and innocence alluded to in the aria’s second half in contrast to the anger and guilt that some performers and commentators choose to hear in the crucifixion choruses. The persistent slow tempo of this aria may thus be partly a consequence of its place between the outbursts of the “crowds” in a prevailing modern view of the *St. Matthew Passion*.³¹

AN ALTERNATIVE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Only one recording of “Aus Liebe,” conducted by René Jacobs in 2013, is significantly quicker than the norm and represents an entirely different reading of the movement. At a metronome number of $\text{♩} = 66$ it is most definitely in three beats to the measure rather than the six of almost every other recording. It is also one of the few in which it is possible to hear the oboists’ execution of Bach’s “staccato” instruction present in both the autograph score and the 1736 original performing parts, a marking that makes little sense at slower tempos. Jacobs’s

²⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5b5Y-Uv7Ac>.

²⁹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jl-Mtu67FRE>.

³⁰See the literature cited in n. 22.

³¹On the complexity of this interpretive problem, see Michael Marissen, “Blood, People, and Crowds in Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*,” in *Bach & God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 155–88.

Example 1: Bach, Cöthen Funeral Music, BWV 244/49.

reading strikes me as entirely plausible for "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben" if we are willing to regard the aria as something other than the emotional outpouring the nineteenth century made of it.

And to return to our starting point, it is also an entirely plausible tempo for the parody text "Mit Freuden sei die Welt verlassen" in the Cöthen Funeral Music.³² This faster tempo makes it much easier to understand why Bach and Picander might have chosen the music of "Aus Liebe" for a new poem on this topic, and how the result would have been affectively sensible. We can imagine the reuse of this music for "Mit Freuden" without a radical transformation. Bach sometimes undertook those, as we know from a couple of famous examples,³³ but not often, and he may thus have reused the aria essentially as he had composed it for the Passion text.

The question, of course, is whether Bach had this faster tempo in mind for the Passion aria. We can note that it bears no affect mark of the kind by which he sometimes identified an especially slow movement. Bach could, of course, have put an affective stamp on the

affectively neutral text by writing a very slow piece, but it is not self-evident that the musical type he chose would have been understood in the early eighteenth century as characteristically or topically slow. With its triple meter and scoring without continuo, it appears to be of a type characterized by the bassetto's pulsating quarter notes. Two other Bach vocal movements are like this: the "Suscepit Israel," BWV 243a/10; and the "Qui tollis peccata mundi," BWV 234/4; the music of the latter was originally part of the aria "Liebster Gott, erbarme dich," BWV 179/5, not a bassetto piece in that version (exs. 1, 2, and 3). Neither appears from its notation or context to be a type that an eighteenth-century performer would have regarded as inherently slow. That does not mean "Aus Liebe" could not have been sung and played slowly, but it is difficult to see anything in the musical type, at least, that requires a very slow tempo.³⁴

Also of this type, though not a bassetto piece, is "Qui tollis peccata mundi," BWV 232/9 (ex. 4). As a movement with this Latin text, the work originated in Bach's 1733 Kyrie and Gloria setting for the Dresden court; his realization in the set of performing parts he prepared specifies a cello line in staccato quarter notes, much like the oboe lines in "Aus Liebe." The movement is marked "Lente" in some parts and "adagio" in others, but neither Bach's score of the Kyrie and Gloria nor the sources for the movement's

³²Three recent "reconstructions" of BWV 244a, all historically oriented in performance style, take slow tempos even with the "Mit Freuden" text: Parrot (5:07), Pichon (4:40), and Grychtolik (4:53). These choices suggest the influence of a melancholy view of the *St. Matthew Passion* aria even when its music is performed with the contrasting text.

³³For example, Bach's transformation of the rage aria "Ich will dich nicht hören, ich will dich nicht wissen," BWV 213/9, from a Hercules drama into the graceful "Bereite dich, Zion, mit zärtlichen Trieben," BWV 248/4 in Part I of the *Christmas Oratorio*.

³⁴Thiemo Wind, "'Aus Liebe'—Mit Freuden," argued that the type does, in fact, suggest a quicker tempo, but I am not certain that this point can be demonstrated.

Tromba

Soprano 1

Soprano 2

Alto

Vn 1, 2, Vla.

Sus - ce - pit Is - ra - el pu - e - rum su - um, sus - ce - pit
Sus - ce - pit Is - ra - el pu - e - rum su - um,

Example 2: Bach, "Suscepit Israel," BWV 243a/10.

Traverso 1

Traverso 2

Vn. 1, 2, Va.

Soprano

Qui tollis peccata mundi,

Example 3: Bach, "Qui tollis peccata mundi," BWV 234/4.

German-texted model "Schauet doch und sehet," BWV 46/1, carries a tempo or affect marking. In preparing the Dresden parts Bach evidently felt the need to specify the slow tempo explicitly, suggesting that he indeed did not regard the musical type as inherently slow—if Bach expected the Dresden musicians for whom he prepared the parts, presumably for use without his presence, to play this movement slowly he needed to indicate that explicitly.³⁵

Overall there is no indication that "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben" was

understood as a very slow piece or one with a tragic or mournful affect. So if there is no evidence that it was conceived as a slow aria, when did it get to be that way? I think the answer is in the middle of the nineteenth century—not, evidently, in the first years of the *St. Matthew Passion's* revival, but several decades after. Critical interpretations that associated it with instrumental slow movements contributed, as did a view of the Passion setting as a tragic work altogether. A slow tempo was codified in influential editions that appeared in the 1860s and appears to have predominated well into the twentieth century, when recordings reinforced this view of the aria until it moderated—but only somewhat—in the second part of the century, particularly in historically informed performances. The

³⁵The "Domine Deus II" from Jan Dismas Zelenka's *Missa Divi Xaverii*, ZWV 12, appears to be of the same type, at least in its ritornellos marked Andante; the vocal episodes include strings and basso continuo.

Traverso 1

Traverso 2

Vn. 1

Vn. 2

Vla.

Soprano 1

Soprano 2

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Vc.

Continuo

Qui tol - lis pec - ca - ta mun - di,

Qui tol - lis pec - ca - ta

6 7 6 5 9# 8

Example 4: Bach, "Qui tollis peccata mundi," BWV 232/9.

modern performance tradition of transcriptions of the Passion for chorus, soloists, and orchestra, also inherited from the nineteenth century, likely played a role as well.

We do not know Bach's tempo for this aria in either the *St. Matthew Passion* or the Cöthen Funeral Music. The tempo of "Aus Liebe" remains a matter of interpretation and taste, but in deciding how to perform it we might want to put aside the received tradition of its interpretation and execution and consider it afresh. If we

perceive a poor match among the aria's text, the parody text "Mit Freuden," and Bach's music, we should recognize that any clash stems from a decidedly nineteenth-century view of "Aus Liebe"—this is our problem, not one from the eighteenth century. And if we want a window into the nineteenth-century understanding of the *St. Matthew Passion*, there is no better place to listen than "Aus Liebe," and we do not have to go far to hear performances at the tempo we have inherited.



Abstract.

A high point of almost every performance of J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is the tragic and time-stopping aria "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben," BWV 244/49. It appears to make sense in context, but commentators have long wondered how Bach and his librettist could have reused such somber music in the so-called Cöthen Funeral Music, BWV 244a, with a new text that opens "Mit Freuden sei die Welt verlassen"; the invocation of joy apparently represents a strong contradiction in affect with the music, almost uniformly understood to be very slow.

The slow tempo did not originate with Felix Mendelssohn, who included the aria in his second performance of the *Passion* in 1841. The aria's character appears to have been established later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in critical writings that regarded it as transcendent and representative of the *Passion*'s supposed pure tragedy. The aria arguably came to be seen as the *St. Matthew*

Passion's transcendent "slow movement," a much-venerated instrumental type. Its character was codified in influential nineteenth-century editions that assigned slow tempo and metronome markings, and the recorded history of the work documents very slow tempos, only recently moderated. Adaptations of the aria have taken it to be very slow as well, and represent readings of the received performance tradition of the work. The aria's doctrinal and affectively neutral text and its musical construction suggest the plausibility of a much faster tempo. And this, in turn, could explain why it occurred to Bach and his librettist Picander to reuse it for a text that begins with the concept of joy. The slow tempo of "Aus Liebe" and the problem of its reuse with a very different text turn out to be an inheritance from the nineteenth-century reception of the work. Keywords: J. S. Bach, *St. Matthew Passion*, "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben," tempo, reception, slow movement, Adagio