

# transcript.

Hey there! Welcome to episode 29 of Busy Kids Love Music, a podcast for music loving was. I'm Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so happy to have you here with me today.

Last week we kicked off a series on the famous Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach. In that episode -- which I'll be sure to link to in the show notes in case you missed it -- we learned some interesting things about Bach's life, his family, and his career as a musician and composer. In today's episode, we're going to take a look at one of his most famous works -- *St. Matthew Passion*.

When we talk about a Passion in the context of music, we are talking about a musical setting of the suffering and death of Christ based on either Biblical texts or poetry. These tended to be large scale works that were composed for the orchestra, choir and solo voices. While there are many composers who composed this type of piece, *St. Matthew Passion* is considered by many musicians to be the greatest choral work of all time.

It was tradition in many Christian churches to sing the story of Jesus' Passion during Holy Week, which is the week before Easter. In the early Christian church, a priest would sing the story instead of speaking it. Eventually a choir took over the performance and then the Passion oratorio developed. Now, if you've been listening to my podcast for awhile, the word oratorio might be familiar to you. We talked about oratorios when we dug into Handel's famous oratorio, *The Messiah*, awhile back. An oratorio is a large scale composition for solo voices, choir and orchestra -- and *St. Matthew Passion* is a Passion oratorio because it is an oratorio written about Christ's suffering and death.

Bach takes his words -- or lyrics -- partly from the biblical account of Christ's crucifixion in Matthew chapters 26-27 and partly from the poet Christian Friedrich Henrici who wrote many of the librettos for Bach's works.

# transcript.

During the passion, a tenor soloist sings the part of Matthew, the evangelist. Words spoken by Jesus are sung by a baritone or bass soloist. Listen to a little of their parts here...

The evangelist's words are accompanied by an organ and cello, and Jesus is accompanied by strings. These soloists sing passages called recitatives, which are sung music that imitate the rhythm of speech.

Between the recitative sections of the Passion are arias are songs written for soloists and accompanied by the orchestra, sometimes with an instrument playing a solo. The words of the arias tell what is happening in the story and in the minds' of different people in the story -- soldiers, high priests, the crowds. These solos are sung by a soprano, an alto, a tenor and a bass. The one you hear now is sung by an alto with a solo violin. The words are in German. Translated, this aria says, "Have mercy, my God, for the sake of my tears! See here, before you, heart and eyes weep bitterly."

The large choir was divided into two sections, and sang chorales throughout the passion oratorio. The chorales are similar to hymns and the words were likely familiar to the congregations watching the oratorio. The congregants may have sung along during these portions of the performance.

As is traditional for a musical Passion, the resurrection is not mentioned, and the story concludes with the choir shedding tears after Jesus has been put to death. Orchestral instruments that are used include violins, violas, cellos and double basses -- two organs (one for each choir), flutes, oboes and a bassoon.

*St. Matthew Passion* was most likely performed on Good Friday of 1727, which is a Christian holiday commemorating the death of Jesus during Holy Week and preceding Easter Sunday

Bach performed it a few times in the years to follow, but the piece was nearly forgotten about, as was Bach, after his death.

It was a performance of *St. Matthew Passion* that was organized and conducted by composer Felix Mendelssohn in 1829 that renewed interest in J.S. Bach. This performance was no small undertaking for Mendelssohn. It took him 5 years to edit and prepare the score for performance. It was received with great success, and after its initial performance, performed again 10 days later in order to celebrate Bach's birthday. This sparked renewed interest in Bach's work among the public, and his work began to be appreciated and performed again for the masses, rather than just studied as technical exercises by musicians.

It is common to hear *St. Matthew Passion* performed around the Easter holiday and it takes about 3 hours to perform. It is typically divided into two parts with a long break in between the two parts. Head over to my show notes at [busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/29](https://busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/29) where you'll find a link to a playlist on YouTube that features some of the music from *St. Matthew Passion* (don't worry -- I didn't link up all 3 hours of the music!). I've curated a list of 10 selections from this famous Bach piece for you to enjoy over the next two weeks, until a brand new episode of Busy Kids Love Music airs. Again, you'll find that at [busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/29](https://busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/29)

I hope you've enjoyed learning more about Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in this episode, and I look forward to continuing our series on Bach with you again in two weeks on the Busy Kids Love Music podcast. Bye for now!