

***Passion* – a distinctive genre of Easter Oratorios**

Ioan Tomi

For the Christian Church and for the spreading of its teachings, the Passion of our Saviour Jesus Christ has constituted, since early Christendom, the source and reference mark of its entire existential philosophy. It also defines the artistic, theatrical or musical creation, having as subject the sufferings and sacrifice of Christ.

The Passion was known through the texts of the Evangelists and spread by the clergy, in church. In early Christendom, when knowledge was extremely limited, the people learned about it during the service.

How to efficiently and widely spread these teachings – this has been the permanent concern of the Church. The artistic forms, of „theatrical“ type, have proved themselves to be more useful in this direction than the often plain preachings.

In the 4th century, as different documents attest it, the Passion was presented on Palm Sunday and during the Holy Week as a „dramatic play“. There were four performers out of the clergy. The first one was the Narrator. He will be later the Evangelist. The second character represented Jesus Christ. The third one played various characters (Peter, Judas, Pilate, The Great Priest, Vergin Mary etc.). The fourth character was the voice of the people.

The whole text was in latin, although in the 6th-9th centuries greek texts were used as well.

About the synoptic image of the evolution of sacred plays during the Holy Week, called the *Passion Week* , the „Oxford Companion to Music“ mentions that at the beginning of the second millenium:

- in Rome, Italy, in 1264, „Compagnia del Gonfalone“ was licenced with the purpose of acting the sufferings of Christ. Documents of that time mention that in the 15th century the Passion was performed in the Colisseum (!). In 1554 it was still performed within churches.

- in France, the „Confrérie de la Passion“ was given in 1402 royal privileges, i.e. a monopoly of performances of such plays.

- in Germany, one of the old Passion plays survives in Oberammergau, in Bavaria, enacted every ten years.

- Britain also had such sacred plays.

The 14th-17th centuries bring an emancipation to music. These are times when the use of national languages within church is promoted in order to give to a larger number of persons direct and immediate acces to the biblical teachings. In music, the complicated poliphony of the 15th century is left aside and the use of a harmonic style has been introduced. The most important consequence of the Reform on music was the emergence of the *Protestant Choral* .

Johann Walther (1496-1570), Luther's friend, produced in 1520 the first Passion in the vulgar tongue, it had a great vogue and was still in use in one or two places at the opening of the 19th century.

The old latin form remained in use in Roman Catholic countries, the modern form in Germany and northern Europe generally.

Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) is the first outstanding German composer.

Hamburg had a role of utmost importance for the German musical life, especially in the 17th-18th century, when it had a prosperous economic life (commercial, industrial, shipping, etc.) but also an artistic life flourished far more than in other German cities. The public was compared with that of Florence or Venice. In Hamburg, biblical works such as Passion continued to exist, but only with liturgical purposes. An important role played in this respect the composers Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767), Johann Mattheson (1681-1764), Reinhard Keiser (1674-1739) and Georg Friedrich Händel (1685-1759) – until his final settling in England.

No doubt about it, the Passion reached its highest point, not only in Germany but also in the whole world, with the work of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). The *St Matthew Passion* (Matthäus Passion) by Bach is technically, emotionally and devotionally the greatest work of its kind ever written, and it is practically the last of the Passions of the classical type".

This dramatized *Oratorio*, is a vaste fresco of the Man embodied by Jesus Christ, of the eternal battle for the Good and the Truth, battle in which all sufferings, violence, treason, hypocrisy or self-sacrifice were merely steps to his rising to perfection.

Both „Matthäus Passion“ and „Johannes Passion“, represent, as Sigismund Toduta considers, *the peak of artistic perfection of oratorical art of the late Baroque... All elements of the characteristic formula of the **Passione** oratorio are gathered in this monumental vocal-symphonical piece of work.*

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788) wrote 21 cantatas on parts of the story of the Passion. Niccolò Jommelli's work (1714-1774), who lived 15 years in Germany, set an Italian text of Metastasio in his oratorio. Other settings of the *Seven Last Words* are that of Haydn, Dubois, Perosi. There are also present day works: Krzysztof Penderecki's *Passio et Mors Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Lucam* and Paul Constantinescu's *Patimile si Învierea Domnului* (Passion and Resurrection of Christ) – a byzantine Easter oratorio - and, by extension, Bujor Hoinic's *Patimile martirilor (Martyr's Passion)*, dedicated to the fallen heroes in the December 1989 Timisoara Revolution.

Percy A.Scholes: *The Oxford Companion to Music* - Passion Music - § 1 Origin and Earlier Development, pag.771.

· **op.cit.** § 2 The influence of the Reformation, pag.771

2 op. cit. **The Oxford ...** § 6. The Post -Bach Passions pag.772.

Sigismund Toduta: *Formele muzicale ale Barocului în operele lui J.S.Bach* pag.308.