The music was now very loud. … Dora stood for a moment … attending to the music. Yes, it was Bach all right. … She listened now with distaste to the hard patterns of sound which plucked at her emotions without satisfying them, and which demanded in an arrogant way to be contemplated. Dora refused to contemplate them.¹

Dora Greenfield’s adverse reaction to Bach’s music from Iris Murdoch’s 1958 novel The Bell. Murdoch’s point is this: Bach’s music draws the listener in if she will allow it; it demands full engagement at an intellectual and emotional level. It can never be mere background music, but demands the active involvement of the hearer.² Even at its most basic level, Bach’s choral music calls on us to be intent listeners. At an emotional and spiritual level, it calls us to be participants in the stories that unfold musically, to take our place among the protagonists and share in the human responsibility for their all-too human actions.

This paper will examine some of the aspects of the powerful intellectual and emotional engagement demanded by Bach’s choral music of his hearers. It will argue that Bach intentionally wrote choral music to communicate profound theological insights, following Martin Luther’s precept that music was both sermo et vox [word and voice].³ In doing so, it draws on a number of manuscript sources to give an insight into Bach’s theological reading of scripture and his self-understanding of vocation, before examining the ways in which Bach expressed his beliefs through choral music, by analysing in detail four consecutive movements of the St Matthew Passion [BVW 244, 61a-63b]. The sections chosen are Bach’s musical depiction of the death of Jesus. A close reading—or rather close listening—of the words and different forms of music will concentrate on two key concepts:

• the role of Christ, especially the ways in which Bach illustrated the self-emptying of Christ, and the perceived absence of God the Father, Luther’s Deus absconditus, at the point of Christ’s death;

²
• the roles of the historic bystanders from Matthew’s narrative who testify ‘wahrlich, dieser ist Gottes Sohn’, and who compel us—the individual listeners—to become a present-day bystanders and witnesses to Christ’s kenotic divinity, compel us to engage with the narrative with absolute contemplation, and be drawn into the story of the cross.4

1. Bach’s Theological Understanding:

When Bach came to apply for the position of Thomaskantor at Leipzig, not only his musical ability but also his theological understanding, were closely examined. Bach’s soundness of faith was scrutinised in two three-hour examinations on 8 May 1723 by the Leipzig superintendent Dr Johannes Schmidt and professor primarius Salomon Deyling the dean of the theological faculty. Such an examination might have been a routine practise of the Saxon consistory in the appointment of church cantors, or held specially because Bach was at the time of application in the employ of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen, and therefore a working at a Calvinist court and within a Reformed (and therefore not a Lutheran) tradition.5 The fact that he was sent a copy of the Lutheran Formula of Concord with the consistory’s letter of appointment suggests the latter.6 Whatever the precise reason for Bach’s thorough theological examination, it demonstrates that he had not only significant theological learning but that, in the context of his appointment at Leipzig, his learning had been publicly assessed and found to be above reproach.7 Indeed, in taking up the appointment as Thomaskantor, Bach undertook daily to instruct students at the Thomana—St Thomas’ Choir School—‘conscientiously’, ‘not only in vocal but also in instrumental music’, as well as in ‘the vivid knowledge of divine essence and will’ and ‘the knowledge and fear of God’.8

Bach’s appointment process at Leipzig demonstrates that he was not only a practising, but a certified orthodox, Lutheran. Bach was clearly influenced by the Pietist movement of his age, with its emphasis on a lively personal relationship between the believer and God. Although he was theologically extremely well read he remained, of course, a musician. He therefore never

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4 ‘Truly, this was God’s Son’.
5 Which would explain the dearth of vocal music produced during the six years Bach spent in Köthen, cf. Bach Reader, p. 105, Wolff, Bach, 199: ‘The Calvinist liturgy left little, if any room for concerted Church music, so it required some special occasion for a cantata to find its way into the service’.
6 Neumann, Schulze, Bach Dokumente II, nos. 135-6
7 Martin Geck, Bach: Leben und Werk (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 2000), 150, documents how, in 1722, Conrad Küffner, a candidate for the position of cantor at St Katharinen in Zwickau failed to pass his consistorial examination, which included questions still current in a Bibelprüfung for Lutheran theologians. Küffner was asked to reflect in detail on Scripture, including technical questions on the length of individual works, locating Scripture passages in their context, such as ‘Where in the Bible does the statement ‘Das ist das ewige Leben’ occur?’, and doctrinal questions including ‘what are the characteristics ascribed to God the Father as the first person of the Godhead?’
8 Bach Reader, p. 105, Thomana Ordnungen 1723, p. 12.
reflected on his theological method, nor set down any theological writings beyond the theology contained in his choral works. Nevertheless, Bach differed from his contemporaries, who only tended to leave musical manuscripts, in leaving behind numerous theological works, including a commentated Bible by the seventeenth-century Lutheran expositor Abraham Calov, the dean of the theological faculty and superintendent of Wittenberg. Calov’s commentary is heavily annotated which demonstrates beyond doubt that Bach had read and marked it (and therefore probably ‘inwardly digested’ it as well). Bach evidently took care to inform his Lutheran Pietist beliefs through the study of Scripture, and its interpretation by orthodox Lutheran commentators.

His music manuscripts give us a practical insight into his Pietist spirituality: Bach began most compositions with a Latin prayer asking Jesus to aid him [‘Jesu Juva’] and concluded them with a Latin prayer of thanksgiving glorifying God, ‘SDG’ or ‘Soli Deo Gloria’ [to God alone be glory]. This strongly suggests that he had a personal faith in the power of God to aid, help, and support his craft, and that he believed, like Martin Luther, that God alone was worthy of all praise. In addition, his annotated Bible commentary gives us an insight into his Lutheran theology, in particular his theology of vocation as a preacher through music, living out Luther’s precept that ‘God has preached the Gospel through music’, and that, ‘after faith we can do no greater good than to praise, preach, sing and in every way laud and magnify God’s glory, honour, and name’.

2. Vocation as a basis for music and music making:

Luther held that ‘the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man that he should praise God with both words and music, namely, by proclaiming [God’s word] through music and by providing sweet melodies with words’. Bach developed Luther’s doctrine further, when he annotated his Bible, noting that ‘in sacred music God is always present with his grace’. The account of the musical spectacle of the dedication of the Temple in 2 Chronicles (2 Chron 5.11-14) was a rich source of marginalia in Bach’s expository Bible. For Bach, the event

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9 Beisswenger, Bachs Notenbibliothek, Leaver, Bach’s Library: his musical collection included works by Buxtehude, Schütz, Telemann, Pachelbel and Italian composers such as Frescobaldi and Albinoni.
10 Handel followed Bach in concluding some of his works with ‘SDG’.
11 ‘All Ehr und Lob soll Gottes sein’
12 LW 54:129-30, reflecting on the music of Josquin du Prez, whose ‘compositions flow freely, gently, and cheerfully, are not forced or cramped by rules, and are like the song of the finch’; LW 12:300, Commentary on Psalm 45.
14 Bach Reader, p. 161, nos. 165, b and d: ‘Bey einer andächtigen Musik ist Gott allzeit mit seiner Gnaden Gegenwart’.
15 ‘In sacred music God is always present with his grace’
pointed beyond itself to ‘the true foundation of all God-pleasing church music’: it was all about singers and instrumentalists playing together ‘in unison in praise, and thanksgiving to the Lord’ (2 Chron 5.13). Abraham Calov made the systematisation of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation his life work. Unsurprisingly, in his Commentary Calov viewed the events of the dedication of the Temple entirely in terms of vocation. Calov emphasised that God not only orders our lives, but that he calls each one of us to our allotted place and station, concerns that clearly reflect as much on the hierarchy of the Solomonic temple as on Luther’s theology of vocation. The passage that caught Bach’s eye so much that he annotated it identified three different forms of vocation: the vocation of musical performers to a specific office within Temple worship; the order of the performers itself within their musical divisions; and the actual structure of their performance.

Luther and Melanchthon held that God orders and directs the entire world by calling people to a particular office and station. Calov developed their strong understanding of vocation further in a variety of areas. What was significant for Bach as a composer, is Calov’s understanding that office and calling are best shown at work in the context and order of worship: ‘for God is a God of order’. Bach is profoundly influenced by Calov’s theology of vocation combined with Luther’s theology of music as a preaching agent of the Gospel. It shaped the understanding of his own craft, and provided a foundation narrative for church musicians. For Bach music and worship ‘was especially ordered by God’s spirit’. Like Calov he believed that divine service was a reflection of the divine order of the universe: preachers, performers, and worshippers each took their God-given place according to their calling in order to offer their

16 ‘das wahre Fundament aller gottgefälliger Kirchen Musik’.
18 LW 45.317-337: How is it possible that you are not called? You have always been in some state or station; you have always been a husband or wife, or boy or girl, or servant. Picture before you the humblest estate. Are you a husband, and you think you have not enough to do in that sphere to govern your wife, children, domestics, and property so that all may be obedient to God and you do no one any harm?
19: ‘Sie wurden gezehlet (und verordnet) zum Werck nach ihrem Ampt (dasselbe in gewisser Ordnung zu verrichten).’ ‘They [the performers] were numbered (and arranged in order) for their work by their office (to perform the same according to a certain order itself)’.
20 ‘For God is a God of order’ [Gott ist ein Gott der Ordnung]. Calov’s great emphasis on word, and invitation in the context
21 LW 49.429: ‘they [the prophets] held theology and music most tightly connected, and proclaimed truth through Psalms and songs’.
22 Ein herrlicher Beweiss, dass neben anderen Anstalten des Gottesdienstes, besonders auch die Musica vom Gottes Geist durch David mit angeordnet worden’
praise and worship. Within this God-given order Bach saw his own station as a preacher in sound: someone who used his musical gifts to praise as well as to proclaim God.

3. Bach’s Cantatas and Passions

Bach ordered his own music to achieve the overall purpose of his calling, crafted it to communicate an understanding about God, and faith in God, to others. The form and shape of his music reflected his life purpose, which in turn reflected God’s universal order: the composer was placed ‘to work according to his office, to perform the same according to a certain order itself’, Calov held and Bach believed. Bach’s cantatas and passions provide us with an insight of how Bach achieved this aim.

Prior to Bach, the solo motet had been used to set sacred texts to music. In the mid 1710s Bach adapted an existing secular genre first developed in mid-seventeenth-century Italy, shortened operas called cantate et arie. Bach’s sacred cantatas would have been regarded as slightly old-fashioned, but proved to be a highly versatile musical form.

Three basic elements make up the cantata:

- Recitatives, chanted Scriptural texts based on the Luther translation of the Bible
- Arias, virtuosic settings of contemporary poetry, that reflect on the Scripture recitatives
- Chorales that link the other texts with the hearers’ day-to-day spiritual practice

Arias served as a tool for interpretation and elaboration, and often provide a response to the narrative, chorales are more elaborate versions of Lutheran congregational hymns, and root the musical experience in the wider spiritual tradition of the hearers. Using these three musical building blocks, Bach succeeded in creating ‘sermons in sound’ that conveyed a theological message in the same way that a contemporary Lutheran Pietist expository sermon would; not merely pleasing rhetoric, therefore, but rhetoric that demanded contemplation and sought the

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23 the aim and purpose of all of Bach’s compositions—is summed up well in the introduction to his Orgel-Büchlein, his little organ book [BWV 599-644]. Dating from his Weimar period, from 1708-14, it contains 48 ‘ausgeführte Choräle’ [through-composed chorale preludes] for the church’s year. He dedicated his Orgel-Büchlein ‘dem Höchsten Gott allein zur Ehren, dem Nechsten, draus sich zu belehren’ [‘To the Glory of God most high, and for the edification and education of my neighbour’].

24 ‘verordnet zum Werck nach ihrem Ampt (dasselbe in gewisser Ordnung zu verrichten’).

25 Although Bach probably would have referred to it as Hauptmusik (principal music) or simply Musik.
implanting of Christianity in the inner or new man, the soul of which is faith, and its effects the fruits of life’.

During his time as Thomaskantor Bach produced no fewer than 300 cantatas, of which 244 have survived in full. In the first five years of his tenure alone, Bach produced a full cycle of 59 Cantatas every year. At any given moment, Bach worked on a number of Cantatas. The process of writing a new libretto began by selecting suitable extracts from the set sermon text for his recitatives. These were matched with poetical reflections, commissioned from a number of local poets for use as aria texts. Individual verses from popular hymns completed the libretto. Since the sung words—Scripture, poetry and chorales—amplified the spoken word of sermon text and sermon, members of the Leipzig consistory reserved the right to scrutinise them. Once approved, the libretto would be typeset and printed for use by the congregation. Bach then set out composing and rehearsing the Cantata, assisted by his wife Anna Magdalena and his children Johann Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel as copyists. He rehearsed vocal parts with members of the St Thomas Choir on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, and orchestral parts on Thursday. Both vocalists and orchestra came together for the first time on Saturday for a Sunday performance of the work.

Bach used the same compositional process for his Passions. His Passions are extended Cantatas that use a single consecutive source of Scripture rather than a selection of thematically related Bible texts for its narrative (as would have been the case for most of his Cantatas). The

26 Phillip Jakob Spener, Pia Desiderata oder herzliches Verlangen nach Gottgefalliger Besserung der wahren evangelischen Kirchen (Frankfurt am Main: Johann David Zunner, 1674).
27 Catalogued in the Bachwerkverzeichnis and published in the nineteenth-century Bachgesamtausgabe, of which many have been or are being re-edited in the Neue Bachausgabe. Because of the pressure of composing, copying and rehearsing a half hour composition every week, in his first year at Leipzig, Bach reused a number of earlier Cantatas, written during his time at Weimar. Subsequent Cantata cycles consist of entirely new works.
28 for performance on the Sundays of the year, and on the Feasts of the Epiphany, Candlemas, the Annunciation, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, The Feast of the Visitation, the Birth of St John the Baptist, Michaelmas, New Year’s Day and the Inauguration of a new Council
29 including his Weimar librettists Erdmann Neumeister (1671-1756) and Salomo Franck (1659-1725) as well as the Leipzig poet Picander, Christian Friedrich Henrici (1700-1764), the author of the libretto for the St Mark and the St Matthew Passions.
30 were probably sourced from a variety of Lutheran hymnals, such as the Neues Leipziger Gesangbuch by Gottfried Voppelius (1682) and the Geistreicher Liederschatz (1715) Neues Leipziger Gesangbuch (Leipzig: Christoph Klinger, 1682), which ran through two further editions in 1693 and 1707, Geistreicher Lieder-Schatz, oder Leipziger Gesang-Buch (Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Braun, 1715), with subsequent editions in 1717, 1724 and 1732.
31 although it is not clear whether the consistory did ever censure Bach’s choice
32 Wolff, Learned Musician, 259: "Before composing the cantata, he [J. S. Bach] had to select its text and prepare it for publication in the form of booklets that the congregation could read before or during the performance."
underlying theological principles, and musical building blocks (recitatives, arias and chorales) are however identical. Since it took far longer to write them, Bach only ever wrote four Passions, of which two—the Passion according to St John (BWV 245, 1724) and St Matthew (BWV 244, 1727)—survive in their entirety. The following examples, movements 61a-63b from the *St Matthew Passion*, give an insight into how Bach set text to music in order to amplify his theological message: in this case the message of Good Friday, that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself’, that it is ‘by his wounds that we are healed’, and that this healing salvation demands and effects conversion.

4. Close reading:

We take up the story at Jesus’ cry of abandonment on the cross—a recitative shared by two voices: a tenor evangelist singing the passion narrative itself and a bass singing the words of Jesus. Two short choruses follow, representing a crowd of bystanders at the foot of the cross who mistake Jesus’ words ‘eli eli lama sabachthani’ for a final call for Elijah to intervene. Crowd and evangelist, continuo and full orchestra interact with one another, the crowd calling a halt to one of the last signs of mercy—a man with a reed soaked in vinegar lifted to Jesus’ mouth—in order to ‘see whether Elijah will come to his aid’. The brief choruses are followed by a verse from the Passion chorale ‘O Sacred Head’ reflecting on the hope that the hearers may never be abandoned by Christ in death, which in turn is followed by a triumphant recitative depicting the earthquake, rending of the temple veil and resurrection of the saints. The cynical bystanders, led by the centurion of the Roman guard, turn into witnesses testifying to the divinity of the crucified in a brief chorus that ends the section.

In his manuscript, Bach uses different ink to distinguish the Scriptural texts sung by the evangelist and Jesus—in red—from Scriptural texts sung by the crowd, poetry or chorales, which are written in black. We will be listening to, and looking in some detail, at the two ‘red letter’ movements of the section, the two continuo recitatives.
61a: Bach creates an almost tangible sense of the three hours’ darkness covering the whole land by the evangelist’s slow, sustained monotone on the subdominant. Jesus’ loud cry is musically realised by a dynamic change as well as a—brief—resolution to the component major key (F). Jesus then speaks for the last time in the passion. The evangelist providing the German translation from the Aramaic mimics Jesus’ line, but begins a third higher.

Until now, regardless how arduous his ordeal, the words of Jesus had been surrounded by a ‘halo’ of strings accompanying the basso continuo of chamber organ and cello. In this recitative, as Jesus sings of his abandonment by God that halo of strings is notably absent. The ‘halo’ of strings is almost certainly a musical representation of the close connection between Jesus and the Father. By its obvious absence Bach makes a theological point central to Martin Luther’s theologia crucis: a musical sign of completion of the Son’s self-emptying and the Father’s ‘absence’—the Lutheran understanding of the Deus crucifixus et absconditus, the God whose strength is revealed in weakness and who is concealed, hidden, at the point of Christ’s abandonment. For Luther, the angefochte Christus, the afflicted Christ, is an exemplar for human suffering and isolation, as well as a revelation of God’s mercy.

33 McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, p. 167.
62: The misinterpretation of the words of Christ by the crowd concludes the recitative. Bach immediately amplifies his allusion to Luther’s theology of the angefochtene Christus by inserting the penultimate verse from Paul Gerhardt’s [translation of Salve, caput cruentatum, better known as the] Passion Chorale, to break the narrative. The chorale had served as a Leitmotiv of the Passion, anchoring the experience very firmly in our own experience, referring back at each point of the story to the insight that it was our sins that brought Christ to the cross in the first place, as well as the hope that Christ would impart to us life by his death, and strength by his wounds. Immediately after reporting Jesus’ death, the choir pleads that, although Christ felt complete abandonment by God, he would remain with us in the hour of our deaths: ‘Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden, dann scheide nicht von mir’:

When I shall have to leave here,
then leave me not alone,
When my own death has drawn near,
forsake me nevermore.
When I am wracked by fear, Lord,
and terror strikes my heart,
then take away my anguish,
by thy own fear and pain.

Christ’s example on the cross assures believers not only of their own salvation, but also of Christ’s presence at those times when they face suffering. (One of Bach’s sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, will turn this insight on its head, when he declares in his St Matthew Passion—through the medium of a different verse from the same Passion Chorale—

Ich will hier bei dir stehen,
Verachte mich doch nicht!
Von dir will ich nicht gehen,
Wann dein Herze bricht.
Wann dein Haupt wird erblassen,
Im letzten Todesstoß,
Alsdann will ich dich fassen,
In meinen Arm und Schoß.

Here would I stand beside Thee,
Lord, bid me not depart!
From Thee I will not sever,
Though breaks thy loving heart.
When bitter pain shall hold Thee
In agony opprest,
Then, then will I enfold Thee
Within my loving breast.)
63a and b: The following recitative is probably nearest thing to opera in Bach’s entire work, as the composer paints the dramatic events surrounding Jesus’ death in music. Bach wrote *Augenmusik*, music for the ears as much as for the eyes, and the score reveals this well: the continuo cellist provides a sharp and swift demisemiquaver (thirty-second note) accompaniment to the soaring evangelist’s melodic line; both represent, in turn, the rending in twain of the temple veil ‘von oben an’ [from top] with its ascending cello line, ‘bis unten aus’ [to bottom] with its descending counterpart, as well as representing the earthquake that split the rocks ‘die Felsen zerrissen’ and opened the tombs of the saints in readiness for their resurrection at the time of Christ’s resurrection. As the universe is transformed, as earth gives birth to new life, and a ‘new and living way is opened for us through the temple curtain’ (Heb. 10.19), the bystanders also are changed, from cynical persecutors to believers. Led by the Roman centurion and his guard, the choir concludes by confessing ‘truly this was God’s own Son’. Suddenly the halo that surrounded the sayings of Jesus is back, shining in full glory, not just strings but accompanied by woodwind as well, as the composer underlines the transformation of the crowd from unbelievers to believers, from bystanders to witnesses through the agency of Christ’s death. As Christ serves
as an exemplar of suffering and obedience for us, so they serve as an example of the power of God to transform lives, and the charge to us to witness to that transformative power, to become ‘doers of the word’ and not hearers alone.

5. Conclusion:

J. S. Bach’s Passions were revolutionary: musically, textually, and theologically. Unlike earlier composers who used the traditional Good Friday Vespers for a musical performance to a passive audience, Bach’s libretti and musical settings engaged radically with us, his hearers. They served as a fundamental vehicle to communicate the Word of God and to effect a personal response in the listener. Bach’s detailed musical exegesis and word setting make use of Lutheran theological and homiletic skills as well as musical, an emphasis underlined by Bach’s re-positioning of the sermon at the centre of the Passion performance. *Sermo et vox*, word and voice, here go hand in hand to create a profoundly moving event that, as Dora in Murdoch’s *The Bell* intuitively knew (and rejected) ‘pluck at our emotions’ and ‘demand in an arrogant way to be contemplated’. They demand of his hearers to be drawn into the mystery of the Gospel of the cross, to be placed into the story so that we might take responsibility for our own actions, and so be transformed from hearers to witnesses.