

## Background to the *Brockespassion*

Writing a Passion oratorio was not without its dangers in early eighteenth-century Hamburg. While oratorio Passions—musical works that set the Gospel text with added arias and choruses—were common, Passion oratorios were controversial. The main theological difficulty for conservative Lutherans in Hamburg was that *all* the characters in a Passion oratorio received newly written verses, even the Evangelist! In fact, it might seem strange for audiences today who have grown up with Bach's Passions to hear that the Evangelist in Brockes's text also "speaks" in rhyme.

The poetic Passion oratorio trend began in Hamburg in 1704, with the performance of Reinhard Keiser's setting of *Der blutige und sterbende Jesus*, on a text by galant poet Christian Friedrich Hunold (known by his Arcadian name of Menantes). Hunold's at times graphic poetry, celebrating the pain and suffering of Jesus, was highly influenced by contemporary trends toward a bodily understanding of spiritual matters (a feature of Pietism). It also featured something never before seen in a sacred German work: recitatives and arias, which looked (and sounded) far too much like opera for the religious powers of Hamburg. This suspiciously *Italian*—and therefore *Catholic*—feature caused outrage, as did the fact that the Passion oratorio was performed in a church attached to the poorhouse of the city (Zuchthauskirche) by singers famous from the Gäsemarkt Oper. How dare Hunold and Keiser give such a secular work a quasi-sacred performance, with *opera* singers? Even worse, according to a complaint filed in 1705 requesting legal action to prevent further performances of the oratorio, was the text itself: Hunold claimed in the preface of the published libretto that he represents the suffering of Christ even more emphatically than the Holy Evangelist, and even offensively "compares the tears of Peter to baptismal water."

The debate grew more fiery with subsequent attempts at poetic Passions in Hamburg by the composer and organist Georg Bronner, who advertised new works in 1705 and 1710. The Hamburg Senate banned performances of Bronner's *Geistliche Oratorium oder De gottliebenden Sellen Wallfahrt zum Kreuz und Grabe Christi* in 1710, stating that the work "has flowed much more from the spirit of opera than from God's Word," and that "no edification is to be hoped therefrom except that the ears be somewhat titillated by the music." Yet the objections of the authorities did not prevent the further composition of poetic passions in Hamburg. They may have even encouraged them. This was largely because the Passion oratorio found a new audience, and a new performing locale, thanks to Brockes.

Brockes, a wealthy patrician and future Senator himself, had a different vision for his Passion oratorio. Rather than risking the wrath of church authorities by scheduling a performance in a sacred space, he planned the premiere of Keiser's setting in his own home. As he recalled in his autobiography:

Während der Zeit, nachdem ich das bekannte Passionsoratorium verfertiget, liess ich solches in meinem Hause sehr solenniter aufführen, welches als etwas Ungewöhnliches mir nicht allein die ganze fremde Noblesse, alle Ministros und Residenten nebst ihren Damen, sondern auch den grössten Teil der vornehmsten Hamburger zuzog, dergestalt dass über 500 Menschen zugegen gewesen, welches mir den, zumal alles, Gott Lob!, in der besten Ordre, ohne alle Konfusion und zum Vergnügen aller Zuhörer abgegangen, kein geringes Vergnügen erweckte.

Note the audience that Brockes mentions here. It was not your average church-going Lutheran Hamburger who was present at the premiere; rather, it was foreign nobility, foreign ministers and diplomats with their wives, and the most elite residents of the city. And somehow Brockes's house was large enough to accommodate 500 listeners.

The support of foreigners and elites no doubt led to the eventual acceptance of the poetic Passion as a legitimate genre, even in church contexts. It also contributed to the widespread fame of Brockes's text, one that would be set over and over again by the most famous composers in the German lands. Such was its renown that Johann Mattheson saw fit to organize a Brockespassion festival in 1719—the year before the poet was elected to the Hamburg Senate. There, the versions of Keiser, Telemann, Händel, and Mattheson himself were performed over a series of days around Easter. The event was a huge success, inspiring Mattheson to repeat the festival in 1720, 1721, and 1723.