

Works of Bach include allusions revealing anti-Jewish attitudes

Professor will discuss composer's 'contempt' in Rutgers program

By **DEBRA RUBIN**

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Johann Sebastian Bach — Marissen says performance of his works should be an "educational opportunity."

Johann Sebastian Bach, the 18th-century German musician, is considered one of the greatest classical music composers — by many, the greatest — of all time. But unknown to many of his modern listeners, a number of his cantatas and librettos are filled with blatant expressions of the religious anti-Semitism of his time.

The choral accompaniments are based on the anti-Semitism inherent in the Lutheran Church of the period as proclaimed by Martin Luther, a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation and a staunch anti-Semite.

"In some cases, it is explicit and people sometimes don't know it because it's in German," said Michael Marissen, the Daniel Underhill Professor Emeritus of Music at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. "Some people say it's the music that counts, but I think that's ethically lazy."

Marissen is a scholar of medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and classical European music, and he has written several books on Bach and Handel, including: "Bach & God," "Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion," and "Tainted Glory in Handel's Messiah."

On Wednesday, Feb. 20, Marissen will present "Religious Contempt in the Music of Bach" at Rutgers University's Mason Gross Performing Arts Center in New Brunswick; he will focus on the composer's attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. The program is cosponsored by the university's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life and by the Jewish Music Forum, the academic branch of the American Society for Jewish Music.

Marissen said he became interested in the anti-Semitic references permeating Bach's musicalization of the Gospel of St. John in 1995 after controversy at Swarthmore over a performance of Bach's "St. John Passion" exploded in protests that spread elsewhere.

The orchestral and choral work "is about Jesus' faith, but it uses the terms 'the Jews did this, the Jews murdered Jesus, the Jews, the Jews, the Jews,'" particularly as the chief instigators of Jesus' crucifixion, Marissen told NJJN in a phone interview from his Manhattan home.

The discussions swirling around the performance prompted Marissen, who is not Jewish, to conduct research and write "Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion."

"St. John Passion" is filled with "biblical allusions," Marissen said, citing the lines, "They will put you under the ban" and "They will kill you and think they are doing so in the service of God"; these quotes from the Gospel of John refer to Jesus' warning his followers of actions that will be taken against them by the Jews, planting seeds of anti-Jewish attitudes.

"Some of my colleagues say that Christians are a diverse group and of course there are some disagreements with Jews," he said. "Disagreements are not a problem, but calling Jews murderers and liars is. A problem with the gospel is that it says Jews are murderers and liars by nature."

Marissen spends much of his time presenting lectures at concerts, sometimes along with Jewish or Christian clergy, to illustrate instances of anti-Semitic tropes in the works being played and place them in a modern context.

"A few people say these works shouldn't be performed anymore, while others say they should, but that we should talk about it," Marissen said. He endorses the latter approach; the music should continue to be performed in concerts, he said, "but we should view them as an educational opportunity."



Musicologist and author Michael Marissen said the anti-Semitism expressed in some of Bach's music should not prevent the composer's works from being performed.

If you go

Who: Author and musicologist Michael Marissen

What: Religious Contempt in the Music of Bach

Where: Mason Gross Performing Arts Center, New Brunswick

When: Wednesday, Feb. 20, 7:30 p.m.

Cost: Free

Registration: Contact rsvpbildner@sas.rutgers or 848-932-2033

The program is being presented by Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts to coincide with Windows of Understanding, a program it is cosponsoring with the New Brunswick Community Arts Council and the Highland Park Arts Commission. The program will offer events and art exhibits with the aim of promoting understanding among communities and highlighting the work of organizations that work for positive change.

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