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Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*: Ballet by John Neumeier

American choreographer John Neumeier, director of the Hamburg Ballet for the past five decades, created a ballet in 1981 to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, which his company has performed on tours throughout Europe and in the United States, Canada, Japan, and China. His staging concept accurately reflects the Passion's structure of interlocking textual and musical levels: the narrative and dramatic presentation of the historical events in recitatives; the contemporary personal responses in contemplative arias; and the communal devotional responses in chorales and choruses. He accomplished this with a large cast of forty-one dancers, on a stage divided into two levels (the up-stage area is three steps higher than the down-stage area) and by employing the techniques and vocabulary of both modern dance and classical ballet.

This paper focuses on analysis of the choreo/musical relationships in representative movements of the Passion. Neumeier's overriding goal is always to heighten and vividly communicate the prevailing musical and textual affects with appropriately expressive dance, mime, and abstract sculptural formations. He is sensitive to Bach's word painting and skilled at translating it visually. The choreography respects the forms of the individual arias and chorales, and it dramatizes the structure of the complex choruses. He also introduces recurring dance and movement motives that function as leitmotifs creating inter-movement relationships and promoting increased perception of the Passion as a unified work. Finally, his treatment of the cast as a pool of dancers who represent humanity as a whole underscores the Passion's message that we all have the innate potential to embody either the negative or the positive traits of the historical protagonists. Thus, the choreography reinforces Michael Marissen's position that it is "mixed multitudes of Jews and gentiles together who are depicted in Matthew as inducing Pilate to crucify Jesus." (Excerpts from the Hamburg Ballet's DVD of the *Passion* illustrate this paper.)