



# The Passion

## of our Lord Jesus Christ

Musical settings of the Passion of Our Lord According to John have a long history in the liturgy of the Church. By the eighth century, the deacon of the Mass would proclaim the Passion on a single pitch until he came to the words of our Lord. These would be sung with inflections and cadences borrowed from the patterns used for the Gospel tone. As early as the tenth century, St. Dunstan describes the gestures and movements to be used by the choir boy and the three deacons in singing and acting out the liturgical drama called “*Quem quaeritis?*” In one case, it was performed at the end of the night Vigil for Easter Sunday and reenacted the angel’s announcement of the resurrection to the three women at the tomb of Jesus. By the twelfth century, the Passion was divided into parts for three persons: the deacon as the narrator, the priest as the voice of Christ, and the sub-deacon taking the parts of the crowd and the other persons mentioned in the text. The narrator used a medium range voice, the person taking the part of Christ used a low register, and the person taking the part of the crowd and the other persons in the drama used a higher range of pitches. By this time, we are well on the road to using music drama as part of the liturgy.

In this musical setting of the Passion of Our Lord According to John (OCP 20042TL), the three traditional melodic patterns have been used for the soloists. The narrator uses patterns that are taken from the traditional fifth mode psalm tone. The patterns used for the crowd and the other persons are taken from the upper register of that same fifth mode tone. The lowered seventh degree of the scale is used for the voice of the Lord which is sung in patterns derived from the first mode psalm tone and at a lower register. For this reason, the narrator uses a special descending pattern with the lowered seventh degree to introduce the voice of the Lord. The effect of all of this is to give the words of the Lord a special solemnity and a feeling of great dignity, something quite appropriate to the character of Jesus as given in John’s Passion account. On the other hand, the high, bright pitches used for the voice of the crowd and the other persons in the narration give them sharpness and even a stridency that is appropriate to what they represent in the drama. The fifth mode psalm tone patterns used for the narrator(s) give us the feeling of a sympathetic observer who is telling us the story of the Lord’s Passion and death. The optional use of a second narrator has been included in order to help clarify the different parts of the narration, especially those that are quotes from scriptural prophecies. Optional separate voices for Peter, Pilate, the maid servant, and others are provided for further dramatic effect.

For the final burial scene, an optional melodic setting has been provided that is based on a medieval *Planctus Mariae* melody. This melodic pattern was used in later

medieval mystery plays that portrayed Mary weeping at the tomb of Jesus. It makes for a powerful and dramatic conclusion to the Passion narrative. A wailing chorus has also been provided for this melody that consists of women’s voices above the melody and men’s bass voices moving below that melody as if expressing their grief at the death of the Lord.

An SAB choir part has been provided for the crowd scenes. This, too, follows the traditional development of early settings of the Passion narrative for liturgical use. These texts have been set to music in a very straightforward manner, without repetitions and elaborate musical extensions, a practice followed even as late as the Baroque period by Heinrich Schütz. These choral settings are still considered part of the liturgical proclamation of the Passion narrative and are not in a concert-style setting, as one finds in many excellent contemporary settings of the Passion that are designed for concert use. Since this setting is designed for liturgical use, it should be sung with careful attention to the natural rhythm of the words and the phrasing of the text and according to the expressiveness proper to the context. Even though the choir parts are written in modern notation with specific meter indications, they also should produce the effect of a type of sung speech.

The notation for the solo parts has been given in stemless notes. The singer should look to the text for the proper rhythm and tempo for performing the setting. A good practice technique for both the solo and the choir parts is to speak the text with great conviction and power before adding its musical setting. Such a setting of the Passion will have its fullest effect when singers are aware that they are ministers of the Word of God at the very climax of the entire Liturgy of the Word for the Good Friday service. Even when done as a devotional meditation on the Passion of the Lord, especially during the Lenten season, it is still a solemn proclamation of the Word of God. As the document on the liturgy of the Second Vatican Council has reminded us, when the Scripture is proclaimed, Christ is truly present in our midst (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 7). May it always be so!

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