Lesson from Bach on culture, context

By Chaplain Corey Thornton

The last Saturday of February my wife and I attended a concert at the Minato Mirai Hall in Yokohama. The Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the St. Thomas Church Choir performed Johann Sebastian Bach's St. Matthew Passion. Along with his Mass in B minor, the St. Matthew Passion is widely considered the peak of Bach's artistic achievements.

When performed by an ensemble from the city in which Bach lived and worked for 25 years and sung by a choir from the church for which he composed the piece, you would rightly imagine that the performance was both idiomatic and beautiful. This was certainly the best of Bach performed by musicians who hold cultural claim on his music.

Since the second half of the Twentieth Century, Japan has developed a reputation as a haven for classical music artists and enthusiasts. Many of the cities in Japan, to include Yokohama, boast pristine concert halls, most of which were designed after famous halls in Europe.

The best orchestras in the world tour regularly through Japan confident that their concerts will be well attended. In many ways, what began as a Western art-form has been better embraced in recent years by the Japanese than by the dwindling audiences in the United States.

Whenever I attend concerts, I am always curious to see how the audience will receive the music. For this concert, a background in Western church tradition and German classical music would prove valuable to anyone interested in following the performance. As I sat in the hall before the concert, watching the audience make their way to their seats, I wondered how many might have this background.

There is so much about our understanding of culture that enables us to assimilate things such as history, religion, art and music. Often, as my family and I have visited some of the popular historic sites in Japan, I have felt unable to fully take in and appreciate the thousands of years of history that they represent.

I come away from these visits with envy for those who are apart of such an ancient culture. For one of the few times since we have moved to Japan, attending this concert made me feel that perhaps the tables had been turned to my advantage.

It is helpful to know that much of Bach's music was written for worship in the Lutheran churches that employed him. The St. Matthew Passion is an oratorio that tells the story from the Gospel of Matthew of Jesus Christ's betrayal by Judas Iscariot followed by his trials and crucifixion on the cross. It was not written for entertainment on a concert stage but as an expression of worship in church.

One clue to this was seen at the beginning of the concert. As the musicians came onto the stage they divided into two groups. Bach scored the work for double strings, double woodwinds and double choir. A concert performance gains no discernable benefit from such scoring. Because we know the churches that Bach wrote for split their musicians and choirs into two groups, the scoring makes perfect sense. If you have ever looked inside one of these traditional churches, you may have noticed the clear pathway running right up the middle, from the nave through the chancel to the sanctuary.

This allows a pathway for the clergy to make their way to the altar and to be visible by much of the congregation throughout the service. There are many sacred works written with this divided architecture in mind. Knowing that this music was composed for worship in a church setting makes it unlikely that we experienced the music the way that the composer had envisioned. Even though the best musicians were present in a hall with a gorgeous acoustic and performing to a highly appreciative audience, there still seemed to be something missing. I believe that what was missing was the optimum context for the music and its message.

My impressions after the concert and at the present are of a great respect for the Japanese who attend these performances. To invest so much to be exposed to the great musical traditions of the West reveals a mature openness and sophistication on their part. To hear such a fine work performed out of its original context was for me a lesson in culture.

There are many who believe that many of the societies in Europe and the United States are progressively becoming secular. By this I do not mean that these societies have no religious institutions, but that religion plays a more passive role collectively than it did in the past. Assuming this is true, it is not unreasonable to imagine a time in our future when the great art of our past, much of which was inspired by the religious faith of the artists and intended to nurture the worshipping life of their religious communities, will no longer have a community to fully comprehend it.

It seems an inconvenient truth for some that there are no purely neutral positions regarding religion. Those who would believe that they are doing society a service by compartmentalizing religious influence to the private lives of its individuals, and thus seeming to render it irrelevant to the collective whole, would do well to realize how foundational religion is to the very fabric of our culture. That is not to deny that our state of religious pluralism is at times a complicated business, but rather it is to encourage us to give recognition to the rich heritage of our religious expressions.

These are expressions that come from the depth of our individual and collective soul and speak to who we are as human-beings. It is this cultural heritage that gives us ears for the sacred music of J. S. Bach, Handel, Haydn, Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Bruckner—to name a few—and the eyes for the sacred works of Michelangelo and a hermeneutic for the writings of Dante.

Care Plan cont. from pg. 9

The basic requirements:

The requirements for a Family Care Plan may vary somewhat depending on your service branch or your particular circumstances. But all plans must contain the following basic information:

Name and contact information of your caregiver and an alternate caregiver. The caregivers you select must be non-military, at least 21 years old, and capable of caring for themselves and your family members. You'll be required to sign a statement certifying that your caregiver has accepted responsibility for the care of your family members and that you have provided the caregiver with necessary information and copies of all documents required to be included in the Family Care Plan, such as power(s) of attorney. Provisions for short- and long-term absences. Your short-term care plans could take effect for reasons such as temporary duty, training, school, or short-term involuntary recalls. Your short-term caregiver will most likely be a person living in the local area. Your long-term care plans will become necessary during deployments or times of extended training or involuntary recalls. The long-term caregiver does not have to live in the local area.

Financial arrangements that ensure the self-sufficiency and financial security of your family members. You must provide documentation of allotments and other financial resources and describe how they are to be used. A copy of your power(s) of attorney must be included with your plan.

Logistical arrangements for transporting family members and/or caregivers to a new location. If it becomes necessary for your family to move from one area to another, the logistics for this move should be described in the Family Care Plan. You'll need to cover how family members needing assistance, such as children or elderly and disabled adults, will be escorted and cared for. Be sure to note details such as finances, airline tickets, and transportation to and from airports. If you have different caregivers for short- and long-term absences, your plan should address transporting family members from a short-term caregiver to a long-term caregiver in the case of deployment (or other lengthy separation) with little or no notice.

The name of any non-custodial biological or adoptive parent not named as the caregiver, along with that person's consent to the Family Care Plan. It will be important for you to contact him or her as early as possible to explain this requirement and solicit support for your plan. Should the individual not consent, you should seek legal counsel to determine the best course of action and include an explanation of the circumstances in your plan.

The name of the person you designate to have temporary responsibility for your dependent family members in the event of your incapacity or death. You may have named someone in your will to have custody of your children in the event of your death, but you also need to designate someone to be responsible until permanent custody can be legally established. It may or may not be the same person as your caregiver. Whether it is or not, you must make note of it in your Family Care Plan.

Additional issues to address:

Aside from basic caregiver information and necessary legal forms, your Family Care Plan should also include specific instructions on arrangements for child care, school, medical care, and family activities. By describing your routines and giving your caregiver as much information as possible, you can better avoid problems and allow your children (or other dependents) the security of knowing things will remain as constant as possible. Outline arrangements for daily activities. Make certain your caregiver clearly understands your family's daily routines. It's a good idea to create a calendar of the week's events -- noting the starting and ending times of the school day, any after-school activities, bed times, and any special events.

Give details on legal, logistical, educational, religious, and other concerns for family care. Let your caregiver know as much as possible how your family life "works." Write down specific details on the logistics of housing, food, and transportation. If it is important to you that your family members attend weekly religious services, let the caregiver know this so she can accommodate. It is wise to also leave the school's (or place of worship's) calendar handy, so the caregiver knows of important upcoming events, as well.

Provide medical information. Does your daughter suffer from asthma and regularly need an inhaler? Does your son take daily medication? It is important to write down detailed information about family physicians, medications and vitamins, hospitals, and regular appointments, so your family's medical needs will be properly addressed.

Provide locations of important documents, such as wills, insurance papers, and birth certificates.

Make sure that ID cards are current. Check to make certain that your family members' ID cards have not expired, and be sure your dependents are registered in DEERS (the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System).

Make sure that your caregiver has information about using military installation and medical treatment facilities. Caregivers who do not already have an ID card must show their power of attorney along with the dependent family member's ID card to enter a military installation and a military medical treatment facility. They may shop for dependent family members in installation commissaries and exchanges as long as they have a letter of authorization signed by the commanding officer of the installation where they'll be shopping. You may request this letter through the ID card office at the installation.

Provide lists of close contacts and other resources. Be sure to provide the following personal information to your caregiver:

• Names, addresses, and telephone numbers of relatives, neighbors, and friends names and telephone numbers of doctors and dentists

• Lists of military and community resources with points of contact and telephone numbers

• An information sheet with the names and addresses of the military unit, commander or commanding officer, first sergeant or commanding chief, command enlisted supervisor, supervisor, and family readiness program point of contact.

Next week part two: Finding help and advice