



Gábor Benda

Steinway & Sons Model D Grand Piano

About the Composition

The first time I was touched by the story of Jesus was in my early childhood in elementary school at about the age of six. I remember we had a wise, elderly and very elegant Bible class teacher. She spoke about five languages and often read to us from foreign books, not only translating but simplifying themes as well.

Somehow, she was always able to connect these different books, these different tales to Jesus; through his teachings and deeds. Once, during a school event I played J.S. Bach's Prelude in C minor (BWV 999). I had a terrible stage fright, after all the whole school was watching, and it was my first public performance. My teacher was really touched by my humble piano playing and said that I played the keys like Jesus walked on water. She told me that Bach is the most important composer in music history and the closest person to God, the closest person to Jesus. At that moment somehow, I understood at this very young age that our whole cultural existence is based upon the existence of Jesus Christ: music, literature, fine arts; everything is connected to him.

From that moment J.S. Bach became my favourite composer. The way his melodies, his polyphonous leads develop in his compositions is like a never-ending energy that moves nature; as the leaves grow on trees and die and grow again in an infinitive circle in a time-lapse video recording. His music imitates the whole eternal cycle of life that is being triggered by an irresistible outside force. This is the essential moving force I wanted to represent in my music. Not to imitate Bach but to follow the substantive nature of things that Bach followed and tell stories to modern humankind in a traditional way through an up-to-date language.

Thirty years after my first performance in elementary school, in the summer of 2020 I had a solo piano concert tour in several mid-century temples. I had six concerts in the province of Szatmár in Eastern Hungary, and all of them were organised in thousand-year-old churches. The atmosphere of these sacral spaces was unique. I felt inspired by the environment: by the acoustic sounding, the magnificent architecture, the congregations. A lot of new melodies came into my mind and I decided that like so many composers in the past I'm going to tell the story of Jesus with my own musical expressions, highlighting the segments that mean the most to me. I chose 12 parts of Jesus's life and melodised them for solo piano. The duodenary number refers to the Twelve Tribes of Israel and Jesus's 12 disciples who symbolise the importance of spreading his philosophy and teachings.

There is a unity between the 1st and 2nd movement: the 1st movement "Waiting for the Messiah" leads the listener into the ambiance of the story and the composition. In the imagination of the listener an ancient Middle East landscape comes alive, and in the atmosphere, there is a positive and exciting feeling full of anticipation.

The 2nd movement: "The Birth of Jesus" has the same feeling. A significant part in the melody is a repeating star motive, that by the way is the motive that starts the piece. The listener can visualise the sky full of stars and a very bright one that shows the way to the stable in the night in Bethlehem.

The 3rd movement is "In the Water of Jordan" ("The Baptism of Jesus"). This is when God said: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." And when the Holy Spirit settled on Jesus's shoulder in the form of a dove there is a short melody that appears four times in a form of variations and represents the Holy Spirit. This movement is a new beginning, the beginning of the New Testament. And for me it is symbolised by the water of Jordan which I wanted to visualise musically.

The Holy Spirit also appears in the 4th movement "Solitude" ("The Temptation of Jesus") three times when Jesus defeats Satan who wants to tempt him. The three temptations of Jesus are symbolised by a rough dynamic unity rich in dissonant minor seconds and tritones. This part appears three times in three separate sections in successions. "Solitude" title refers to Jesus's solitariness and to the atmosphere of the leading theme that repeats itself a register higher and returns at the end of the piece. This is the same solitariness that follows him through his life until his crucifixion.

In the 5th item, we get to know Jesus's ethics by "The Sermon on the Mount". I used different music expressions, huge dynamic amplitude and sharp tempo diversions to demonstrate the sometimes very emotional and sometimes very bright rational nature of Jesus's most important public speech. From my point of view the key element of this speech is the following: "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." There is a correlation in Jesus's reaction to those who hurt him and asks forgiveness for them in the 10th movement before his death.

The connection between the earth and the sky and the metaphysical nature of Jesus's existence can be perceived in the 6th movement "The Transfiguration" where Jesus's supernatural power becomes visible. In this movement the thunder motive repeats itself three times: perfect fifths in a series of three, three times. The powerful musical runs, huge dynamic differences express the supernatural nature of Jesus, the power of miracle.

The 7th and the 8th movement are the golden ratio of the work: the 7th "Jerusalem" ("The Entry into Jerusalem") symbolises the crowd: women, children, men who greeted Jesus. The dissonant and sometimes timid elements of the music represent the danger and the threat that Jesus was under. The joy of the crowd is overshadowed by the ambivalent feeling that is represented in the mainly cheerful music.

The 8th movement "The Last Supper" was inspired by the painting of Leonardo da Vinci. The magnificent master piece exudes clarity from itself and it is tense and calm at the same time and transmits the power of the revelation of Jesus. I wanted to capture this refined tension through my music and the seriousness of the scene.

In the 9th movement "In the Garden of Gethsemane" a dissonant and threatening melody appears three times with tritone: the devil interval. The number 3 identifies the three denials of Jesus: Jesus told Peter that "This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." At the end of the composition, before the recapitulation of the introduction motif, a middle part appears, an interim melody, symbolising Jesus's prayers. The music expresses the troubled state of Jesus and the disciples, the weakness of human nature and the satanic sin of betrayal.

The 10th movement is "The Death of Jesus". 10 is the number of human responsibility: the number of the Ten Commandments.

This part recapitulates everything in human nature in a solipsistic philosophical point of view when human solitude represents itself in an extreme dramatic form. In this part we can empathise with all the characters: Pilat, Peter, Judas; and with Jesus as well who had been crucified. The tragic melody of the piece represents the dramatic nature of human destiny, represents the dramatic fate of all of us. When I played it during concerts, I heard many reactions. People experienced their own losses in their lives. While I am playing sharp, edgy notes during my performance I am thinking of the pain and suffering that Jesus lived through, and the pain and suffering of humanity for whom he sacrificed himself. At the end of the piece a four chord movement imitates the Aramic syllables: "Eli Eli Lama Sabachthani?" ("My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me") and the last note the A0 which is the lowest note on the piano represents death: "Then the sun grew dim, and the Veil of the Temple was torn in two in the middle, and Jesus called out one last time before he died, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

The amazing supernatural force that can be experienced during the 6th movement also appears in the 11th part "The Resurrection of Jesus" where Jesus conquers death. Through the piano runs with massive accelerandos, crescendos and decrescendos the music visualises how the angel of the Lord descends from heaven and rolls away the great stone from Jesus's tomb. In the middle of the piece there is a mid-melody lead. This melody means the miracle of the resurrection.

In both the 6th and 11th movement – the transfiguration and the resurrection – a superhuman force becomes alive, an outside power which is scary and amazing at the same time.

The 12th movement "The Ascension of Jesus" has a very positive and bright tone with a floating and flying sensation like the 1st and 2nd one. This is a part when the triumph of Jesus becomes obvious. All of the three movements are in D flat Major and symbolise the connection between the sky and the earth.

Before he went to heaven he commanded his disciples: "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." This sentence, Jesus's last sentence was that guided me when I wrote the entire work, and the urge to summarise my musical activity through the most important story of our culture.

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1. Waiting for the Messiah

Centuries before, the prophets had foretold that God would send the Messiah, who would come from the house of King David and be the heir to his throne, to reign on Earth with justice and righteousness. The prophecy had not been forgotten; and the fulfilment of God's promise was awaited.

In Nazareth of Galilee there lived a virgin named Mary, who was betrothed to Joseph of the house of David. Before they married, it was found that Mary was with child. So Joseph wanted to reject her tactfully. However, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said to him: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him.

(Matthew 1:20-21; 24)



2. The Birth of Jesus

Towards the end of Mary's pregnancy, Caesar Augustus ordered a census of the population, and everyone went to their native town to register. Joseph was from Bethlehem, a town of Judea, so he and Mary had to go there for the census. In Bethlehem there was no room for them at the inn, so they lodged in the stable. There Mary gave birth to Jesus and placed the baby in a manger. An angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds in the near-by fields and announced the birth of the Saviour. The shepherds visited Mary, Joseph, and the baby, and as they returned they praised God and made known what they knew about the child. Wise men from the East also came to pay homage to the Saviour and to give their gifts to him. A star had showed them the way to the stable in Bethlehem.



3. In the Water of Jordan (The Baptism of Jesus)

Jesus was raised in Nazareth. At the same time, not far from Jerusalem another boy too was growing up: he was destined to become the prophet John the Baptist.

John preached in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming that “the kingdom of heaven is coming near.” He baptised in the river Jordan the people of the region if they confessed their sins and repented. Jesus came from Galilee to be baptised by John, and he baptised him too. As Jesus came out of the water, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit settled on his shoulder in the form of a dove. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

(Matthew 3:2, 17)



4. Solitude (The Temptation of Jesus)

Jesus then went into the wilderness to meditate in solitude. After he had fasted for forty days, the devil tempted him. Jesus, however, resisted the temptation and said: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

(Matthew 4:10)



5. The Sermon on the Mount

Jesus then went around preaching, teaching and healing the sick. Many became his disciples and followed him everywhere.

One day Jesus went up on a mountainside, and from there spoke to the crowd:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

(Matthew 5:3-10)



6. The Transfiguration

One day Jesus took with him Peter, John, and James and led them up a high hill to pray. There his face was changed and shone, and his robe became a radiant white. At his side there appeared Moses and Elijah, and they talked. While Jesus was talking like this, a white cloud enveloped them, and speech was heard from within it: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" The disciples were frightened, they fell to the ground, but Jesus came over to them and said: "Arise, and be not afraid!" At that the disciples looked up, and saw that Jesus was now alone. He then asked them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

(Matthew 17:5 and 7)



7. The Entry into Jerusalem

Jesus and the disciples set out for Jerusalem, to keep the Passover at the Temple. The people heard the news of Jesus' arrival. They took palm branches and went out to meet him. They greeted him joyfully,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!" And Jesus arrived riding on a donkey, just as Zechariah the prophet had prophesied:

"Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

(Matthew 21:9 and Zechariah 9:9)



8. The Last Supper

When the time came for the Passover meal, Peter and John prepared the Passover lamb in the house of a man of Jerusalem. There Jesus ate with his twelve disciples. He knew that he was about to die and told the disciples that one of them was about to betray him. Before eating, Jesus took the bread, broke it and said, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup and said, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

(Matthew 26:26 and 27-28)



9. In the Garden of Gethsemane

After the meal, Jesus went out with the disciples to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. After praying he said to his disciples: "Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" At that moment the armed servants of the Pharisees appeared, to arrest him. With them was Judas, one of the twelve disciples. He came up to Jesus, greeted his master, gave him a kiss and by that kiss indicated who was to be taken away.

(Matthew 26:45-46)



10. The Death of Jesus

The next day Jesus was handed over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, to be put to death for misleading the people by calling himself the Son of God. Pilate, although convinced of Jesus' innocence, sentenced him as the people wished. The governor's soldiers then stripped him of his clothes, placed a crown of thorns on his head, spat on him, flogged him and mocked him. Then they took him to Golgotha, the Place of Skulls, and there crucified him with two criminals, one on each side. Those around continued to taunt and abuse him, but he only said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Then the sun grew dim, and the Veil of the Temple was torn in two in the middle, and Jesus called out one last time before he died, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

(Luke 23:34 and 46)



11. The Resurrection of Jesus

After his death, Jesus was laid in a tomb cut in the rock, and a large stone was rolled over the mouth of the cave. On the third day, the heaven and the earth shook and an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled the great stone away. Jesus rose from the dead, and left the tomb. He had conquered death.



12. The Ascension of Jesus

Jesus spent forty days among his disciples after his Passion and Resurrection, and on the fortieth day they went up onto the Mount of Olives. As the disciples looked on he rose up, was enveloped in a cloud and vanished from sight, but first he bade them farewell: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Amen!

(Matthew 28:18-20)



Photos by Iván Benda

Cover: *Monk in the Copt Chapel in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 2000.*

01. Waiting for the Messiah: *Landscape in Betlehem, 2009.*

02. The Birth of Jesus: *Wedding Church at Cana, Virgin Mary Statue, 2005.*

03. In the Water of Jordan (The Baptism of Jesus):

Baptising Place on the Jordan River, 2009.

04. Solitude (The Temptation of Jesus): *Mar Saba, 2009.*

05. The Sermon on the Mount: *Hills nearby Capernaum, 2000.*

06. The Transfiguration: *Mount Tabor, 2018.*

07. The Entry into Jerusalem: *Landscape in Jerusalem, 2005.*

08. The Last Supper: *Cenacle, The Site of the Last Supper, 2003.*

09. In the Garden of Gethsemane: The Oldest Tree of Gethsemane, 2006.

10. The Death of Jesus: *Via Dolorosa, 2007.*

11. The Resurrection of Jesus: *Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 2007.*

12. The Ascension of Jesus: *Chapel of the Ascension, 2006.*

Concert: *Jerusalem, Österreichisches Pilger-Hospiz, 2006.*

<https://bendaart.hu>

About the illustrations:

The photos in the booklet were made by my father Ivan Benda. Since 2000 he has been taking pictures of the Holy Land almost every year, introducing the life of Jews, Christians and Muslims. He released two albums: "The Living Jerusalem" in 2003 and "The Way and the Truth and the Life" in 2020. His pictures were published in several newspapers and magazines including the National Geographic. He had many exhibitions from Budapest to Rome and Jerusalem. With his unique images he is still illustrating many publications and films.



Recording Setup:

AEA R88 Stereo Ribbon - Close mic

Neumann U87 - AB mic

Reverb: Lexicon 480, Quantec 2192

Track list

01	Waiting for the Messiah	02:45
02	The Birth of Jesus	03:55
03	In the Water of Jordan (The Baptism of Jesus)	04:39
04	Solitude (The Temptation of Jesus)	04:21
05	The Sermon on the Mount	03:37
06	The Transfiguration	03:05
07	The Entry into Jerusalem	03:46
08	The Last Supper	03:54
09	In the Garden of Gethsemane	03:32
10	The Death of Jesus	03:58
11	The Resurrection of Jesus	02:41
12	The Ascension of Jesus	02:20

Total time: 42:33

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