Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

Bach's St. John Passion
Mar 20 - 22, 2020

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)
THE PASSION ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN, BWV 245
Duration: ca. 1 hour and 54 minutes

Ask classically trained musicians to name a composer they always return to, and the answer will often be Bach. Yes, he’s been dead and buried for 270 years, but his creations resonate, in the words of the Bach scholar Christoph Wolff, as “true ideals and imperishable models of art.”

From the breathtaking spirit of his masses, passions and cantatas to the contrapuntal puzzles of his fantasies and fugues, Bach achieved a level of consistency that defies lumping his life’s work into early, middle, and late periods. A seriousness of purpose underlines everything he composed – he lived for the “glory of God and refreshment of the soul” – spanning the grandiose creations for chorus and orchestra to the simplest utterance for a single instrument.

This weekend, one of those grand creations comes to life as TFO and The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay offer their first-ever performances together of the Passion According to St. John. Bach has a special place in the choir’s 40-year history: It was the first major work performed by the soon-to-be-formed Master Chorale, in 1979, at a gym on the University of South Florida campus. Robert Summer, the choir’s founder, led a group of 65 singers and members of the USF Orchestra. Four high school choirs sang the chorales and listeners sat on creaky bleachers.

Then in 2004, the Master Chorale as we know it today performed the Passion under music director Richard Zielinski at churches in Tampa and St. Petersburg. This weekend will be TFO’s first performance of the work.

“This is a piece I’ve been wanting to conduct all my life,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “And it completes the Easter season, so it’s a great time to reflect on this wonderful music. It has this operatic sense of drama, but it’s within a glorious, controlled maturity.”

Composed in 1723, the Passion blends the despair of Christ’s death with the faith of his triumph. It represents a high point among settings of the German Gospel Passion, notably for the subjective treatment of the text and four-part harmonies considered radical at the time. The story unfolds through an evangelist narrator, with various characters fleshing out the action in the style of an oratorio, and the chorus offering glorious commentary. The work has moments of dramatic theater and a disquieting mysticism in its depiction of Christ’s suffering.

Performing the Passion – from the Latin patior, “I suffer” – is a challenge for any group. Depicting Christ’s misery in two hours of music, it must be both intense and meditative, with instruments and voices carefully interwoven. While the soaring choruses of Bach’s Passion According to St. Matthew attest to its popularity, the less frequently heard St. John paints Christ’s final days in strokes both painful and severe. Emotion is laid bare.
Bach revised the *Passion* four times, including an overhaul of the entire score, in part because he drew text from different sources and had to deal with persnickety church officials. But the changes reflect “a degree of continuing freshness, originality, and experimental radiance that make the work stand out,” notes Wolff in his book *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*.

Cast in two sections, the music opens like a ghost ascending: turbulent semiquavers in the strings, a nervous pulse in the bass, and a lament of rising oboes and flutes. The effect – Bach’s miracle of blending grief and hope – is chilling, and sets the tone for the entire piece.

Suddenly, the chorus enters with a monumental outburst, *Oh Lord, Our Ruler*, an affirmation of Christ as the redeemer. Throughout the *Passion*, Bach creates a series of musical layers that show his genius for combinations of instruments, textures and colors. Memorable sections include the eloquent aria *From the shackles of my vices*; the chorus *Art thou not one of his disciples*?; the alarming chorus *Crucify him*!; the spacious *Within my heart’s recesses*; the dramatic semi-fugue of the *Let us not rend it* chorus; and a comforting petition for peace and rest that concludes this magnificent work.

**Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.**