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The Book of Bach

The Bach Collegium Japan, and John Eliot Gardiner

By Alex Ross

“The Bach Collegium Japan delivered a performance of gently glowing beauty,”

Johann Sebastian Bach lost both of his parents when he was nine and watched ten of his children die young. He was, in other words, well acquainted with death, and may have been uncommonly sensitive to the emotional chaos that it engenders. The musicologist Gerd Rienäcker has written that Bach possessed a “consciousness of catastrophe”—a feeling for the suddenness and arbitrariness with which suffering descends on unsuspecting souls. The texts of Bach’s church cantatas—I recently finished listening to all two hundred of them, courtesy of John Eliot Gardiner’s recorded survey—indicate that the life of man is like a rising and vanishing mist; that we live with one foot in the grave; and that those who sit among us like gods will be forgotten. The world is said to be like a hospital in which countless people, even infants in cradles, lie down in sickness. The words “Kyrie eleison”—“Lord, have mercy”—have been set to music thousands of times, but in the first bars of the Mass in B Minor, Bach’s valediction, they become a peculiarly visceral cry, a collective plea for grace.

The Bach Collegium Japan, under the leadership of Masaaki Suzuki, recently performed the B-Minor Mass at Carnegie Hall, as part of Carnegie’s season-long festival of Japanese culture. The Tohoku earthquake was on everyone’s mind, and there was probably no need for Clive Gillinson, Carnegie’s executive and artistic director, to have mentioned it in remarks before the concert began. From the first colossally churning chords, it was clear that Bach had heard the news in advance. What seems so extraordinary about this work, along with other monuments of Bach’s sacred writing, is that it captures the human and the inhuman in equal measure. We feel both the blind mechanics of catastrophe and the desperation of those caught in its midst. Perhaps the most uncanny example is the opening chorus of the “St. John Passion.” The orchestra begins with a divine maelstrom: swirling sixteenth-note figures, stinging dissonances, a pulsing drone in the bass. Three times the chorus cries out “Herr!”—“Lord!”—and then is caught up in the rapid-moving instrumental rhythm, in an image of mortal helplessness.

Suzuki, who was born in Kobe, in 1954, founded the Bach Collegium Japan in 1990. **He has since established himself not only as a pioneer of early-music playing in East Asia but as an international Bach authority.** For the BIS label, he has recorded the large-scale sacred pieces and is nearing the end of a survey of the church cantatas. (Volume 48 is just out; seven volumes remain.) Renditions of Bach’s vocal works these days fall between two extremes: the old-school approach, in which a big chorus and

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ensemble gather to make a hearty din; and the austere stance of early-music radicals, who deploy only an ensemble of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, on the theory that Bach intended one voice to a part. (In the wrong hands, the “one voice per part” approach can yield a scrawny sound, but in recent cantata recordings under the direction of Sigiswald Kuijken, on the Accent label, it has the effect of clearing away centuries of musical clutter.) Suzuki, like Gardiner and the august Belgian conductor Philippe Herreweghe, follows a pragmatic middle path. At Carnegie, he had a chorus of twenty-one singers and an ensemble of twenty-six players. In interpretive style, he tends toward subtlety rather than flamboyance, avoiding the abrupt accents, florid ornaments, and freewheeling tempos that are fashionable in Baroque performance practice. He is strong on clarity and musicality, sometimes lacking in force.

So it was with Suzuki’s B-Minor Mass. The chorus was a marvel of focussed pitch and blended tone: in the opening bars, the sopranos immaculately pierced the air. **Suzuki showed a patient structural command**, giving an arc-like shape to the Kyrie by waiting a hundred or so bars before applying a substantial crescendo. As the evening went on, though, I yearned for more drama, less detachment; the unearthly “Crucifixus,” the scene of Christ’s crucifixion, was oddly pristine, and the shivery Judgment Day chords in the “Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum” section passed by without tremors of strangeness. The fine and experienced soloists—Hana Blazíková, Rachel Nicholls, Clint van der Linde, Gerd Türk, and Peter Kooij—struggled at times to be heard in Carnegie’s velvet cavern. By the end, I wondered whether Carnegie was fundamentally inhospitable to Suzuki’s super-refined style; an intimate space would have revealed more. **Still, the Bach Collegium Japan delivered a performance of gently glowing beauty, with Bach in consoling rather than apocalyptic mode.**

Gardiner, the vital English maestro who has animated repertory from Monteverdi to Percy Grainger, undertook the project of performing and recording all of Bach’s sacred cantatas a decade ago. Beginning on Christmas Day, 1999, and ending on the last day of 2000, he travelled with the Monteverdi Choir and the English Baroque Soloists to more than fifty churches in Europe and America, including hallowed places where Bach worked. As much as possible, the cantatas were programmed according to their appointed place in the liturgical calendar, so that Christmas works were played at Christmastime, Pentecostal ones on Pentecost, and so forth. In a magnificent display of stubbornness, Gardiner went on recording his “Bach cantata pilgrimage,” as he called it, even after the Deutsche Grammophon label withdrew its support. He eventually established an independent company called Soli Deo Gloria—Bach liked to end his scores with those words, which mean “to the glory of God alone”—and began releasing several two-CD volumes each year, with lavish annotations and striking cover photographs of South Asian, Central Asian, and African faces. The twenty-seventh and final installment appeared last fall. (Four other volumes had earlier appeared on DG and are now available as part of a twenty-two-CD boxed set titled “Sacred Masterpieces,” which, at around fifty dollars, is an amazing bargain.) There are five rival cantata surveys—by Helmuth Rilling, Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt, Ton Koopman, Pieter Jan Leusink, and Suzuki—and each has its virtues. Gardiner’s is the most consistently vivid, and offers some of the loveliest Bach singing on record; Magdalena Kozená, Bernarda Fink, Mark Padmore, Gerald Finley, and Dietrich Henschel are among the masterly singers who join the tour.

More than half of the sacred cantatas were written between 1723 and 1726, when Bach was in the early years of his long, and often unrewarding, appointment as the cantor of the Thomaskirche, in Leipzig. For extended stretches of the liturgical year, he produced one cantata a week, and for the most part he refused to take the easy path of reworking older pieces, whether his own or others’. Instead, in what seems a kind of creative rage, he experimented with every aspect of the cantata form, which traditionally served as a musical meditation on the Scriptural readings of the week. There are

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intimidating fugal choruses, sublimely extended operatic arias, frenzied instrumental interludes, weird chords galore, episodes of almost irreverent dancing merriment. To hear the entire corpus is to be buffeted by the restless energy of Bach's imagination. Recently, I listened to around fifty of the cantatas during a thousand-mile drive in inland Australia, and, far from getting too much of a good thing, I found myself regularly hitting the repeat button. Once or twice, I stopped on the side of the road in tears.

If Suzuki tends to play it too cool, Gardiner can err in the opposite direction. He likes strong contrasts of dynamics and tempo, telling shifts of texture and mood. In notes for the cantata "Gleichwie der Regen und Schnee vom Himmel fällt" ("For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from Heaven"), in Volume 20, Gardiner observes that the continuo part "goes ballistic" when the Turks and the Papists are mentioned, and Gardiner's execution of that idea is by no means the only instance of ballistics on the set. Sometimes such interventions seem arbitrary, but more often they serve the charged imagery of the cantata texts: you hear the rain and the wind, the power and the glory, the weeping and the wailing (a shrieking soprano recorder communicates holy terror in the chorus "Ihr werdet weinen und heulen"—"Ye shall weep and lament"). In "Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig" ("Oh how fleeting, oh how trifling") the orchestra even conveys the self-important bustle of an urban crowd.

The almost operatic quality of these narratives is heightened by the changing moods of the liturgical year. The pivotal moment comes at Eastertide (Volume 22), where the sepulchral chants of "Christ lag in Todesbanden" ("Christ lay in the bonds of death") give way to the brassy shouts of "Der Himmel lacht! Die Erde jubiliert" ("The heavens laugh! The earth rejoices"). Among many brilliant efforts by the Monteverdi Choir, the rendition of "Christ lag" stands out: Gardiner has his singers intone the solo lines in unison, each syllable chillingly precise. This release and the preceding one, Volume 21, make for an excellent introduction to the series.

There is no way to tell from the sound itself that "Christ lag in Todesbanden" is being played in the Georgenkirche, in Eisenach, next to the font where Bach was baptized, in 1685. Once you know it, though, you cannot forget it. A sense of occasion, of ritual time, is sustained throughout. Gardiner adds layers of significance in his spirited liner notes, which are based on a tour diary: he speaks of visiting Buchenwald, outside Weimar; of a Leipzig pastor's resistance to East German oppression; of French soccer fans blasting their car horns moments after one performance ended; of a spooky old cleric congratulating the musicians on having administered a good beating to the Devil. Most of all, this mammoth project—an act of devotion worthy of Bach himself—lays bare what is most human in the composer's enterprise. Listening to "Christ lag," I pictured Bach's parents looking on at the baptism of the infant and wondering whether he would live. They had no idea.

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