



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Triumphant Resurrection of Bach Johannespassion

Hofburgkapelle, 18.04.2025 [ENA]

The Johannespassion is one of Johann Sebastian Bach's most searingly dramatic and spiritually profound works, and in the hands of Martin Haselböck and the Orchester Wiener Akademie, it became unforgettable experience. Presented as part of the RESOUND series in the historic Hofburgkapelle, this performance marked an extraordinary moment in musical history—bringing the 1725 version of the Johannespassion back to life.

This performance comes exactly 300 years after its premiere in Leipzig. Haselböck's meticulous approach to historically informed performance, combined with an exceptional ensemble of soloists and musicians, resulted in an evening that was both deeply moving and intellectually invigorating. This was not merely a concert; it was a journey through time, an act of devotion, and an artistic triumph. From the first explosive chords of Herr, unser Herrscher, it was clear that Haselböck was intent on delivering a performance that was as gripping as it was reverent. His direction was precise yet fluid, balancing the structural rigor of Bach's score with an innate sense of dramatic pacing.

The Orchester Wiener Akademie, renowned for its expertise in historical performance, played with astonishing clarity and vitality, bringing Bach's music to life in a way that felt both authentic and immediate.

The transparency of texture, the expressive phrasing, and the historically informed articulation lent the performance a raw emotional depth. Every detail—from the nuanced shaping of the recitatives to the full-bodied grandeur of the choral movements—was executed with an acute awareness of the work's theological and narrative significance.

This Johannespassion was blessed with a cast of truly remarkable soloists, each bringing a unique interpretative depth to their roles. Benedikt Kristjánsson and Sebastian Taschner shared the roles those character whose role is arguably the most demanding in the entire Passion literature. Kristjánsson's delivery was deeply expressive, his declamation crisp and urgent, while Taschner imbued his sections with warmth and a lyrical quality that made the narrative feel strikingly personal.

Matthias Helm and Stefan Zenkl brought a profound sense of dignity and compassion to their interpretations.

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Helm's voice had a rich, resonant authority, capturing both the suffering and serenity of Christ, while Zenkl's portrayal was marked by an introspective vulnerability that lent the performance an almost meditative quality. Their contrasting yet complementary approaches added an additional layer of complexity to the Passion's theological dimensions.

The arias were exquisitely rendered, each one a miniature drama unto itself. Johanna Falkinger and Hannah Fheodoroff (sopranos) sang with a radiant purity that illuminated Bach's celestial melodies, while Alex Potter and Lucija Varsic (altos) provided a deeply moving contrast, their voices imbued with warmth and expressive nuance.

Particularly arresting was Potter's *Es ist vollbracht*, performed with an almost unbearable poignancy that left the audience in stunned silence. The interplay between soloists, orchestra, and continuo felt like a conversation across centuries, each phrase infused with meaning and devotion. In Bach's *Johannespassion*, the chorus is not merely an observer but an active participant in the unfolding drama. Here, the ensemble of eight soloists, who also formed the choral sections, delivered a performance of astonishing intensity. From the venomous crowd outcries of *Kreuzige ihn!* to the haunting lament of *Ruht wohl, ihr heiligen Gebeine*, their precision, balance, and dramatic commitment made the Passion's emotional impact all the more visceral.

Particularly noteworthy was the choral transparency in *Wir haben ein Gesetz*, where the sharp rhythmic articulation underscored the chilling finality of the Sanhedrin's decree. In the more lyrical sections, such as *Ruht wohl*, the singers achieved a breathtaking stillness, capturing the solemn beauty of Bach's farewell to Christ. The Orchester Wiener Akademie, under Haselböck's inspired leadership, proved why they are among the world's leading period ensembles. The instrumental forces were perfectly scaled to the venue, allowing for a sense of intimacy while preserving the grandeur of Bach's vision.

The continuo section was particularly outstanding, lending an improvisatory freshness to the recitatives while providing an unwavering foundation for the vocal lines. The string playing was marked by an expressive warmth, while the woodwinds added a plaintive, almost vocal quality to their phrasing. The natural trumpets and timpani, deployed with stunning precision, lent moments of grandeur and divine exultation, particularly in the triumphantly radiant *Ach Herr, laß dein lieb Engelein*.

One of the most thrilling aspects of this performance was the palpable sense of dialogue between the singers and the instrumentalists.

The phrasing of the oboes, the interplay between violins and continuo, and the almost chamber-like approach to certain sections underscored the human drama at the heart of the Passion story. Hearing Bach's

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Johannespassion in the Hofburgkapelle, a space rich with centuries of musical tradition, lent this performance an added historical and spiritual dimension. The RESOUND project, dedicated to presenting music in venues that reflect their original acoustic and architectural context, ensured that this Passion was heard as Bach himself might have envisioned it.

The result was a concert that transcended mere historical recreation—it was a living, breathing testament to the enduring power of Bach’s genius. Every note, every phrase, and every harmonic progression felt imbued with the weight of history, yet never at the expense of immediacy and emotional connection. There are performances that impress, and then there are performances that transform. This Johannespassion was the latter. Under the masterful guidance of Martin Haselböck, with a cast of unparalleled soloists, and the extraordinary musicians of the Orchester Wiener Akademie, this concert was nothing short of revelatory.

Both spiritually and musically, this performance was an experience that will linger in the hearts and minds of those fortunate enough to witness it. A profound homage to Bach’s vision, it was a reminder of why the Johannespassion remains one of the most powerful works ever composed. Haselböck and his musicians not only honored its legacy but infused it with a vibrant, urgent energy that ensured its resonance for generations to come.

For lovers of Bach, of historically informed performance, and of music that speaks to the deepest recesses of the human soul, this was an unmissable event—one that will be remembered as a defining moment in the 300-year history of the Johannespassion.

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