

MUSIC

Turning a Martyr's Sermons Into a Truly New Song

# THE ST. TOM PASSION

BY KYLE GANN

It disgusted Friedrich Nietzsche that Wagner would revert to Christian themes in his last opera. "An apostasy and reversion to sickly Christian and obscurantist ideals," he called *Parsifal*, and wrote, "I despise everyone who does not experience *Parsifal* as an attempted assassination of basic ethics."

How, then, are we to experience Tom Johnson's *Bonhoeffer Oratorium*? How do those of us who so admire Johnson for his audaciously strict minimalism sit patiently for no less than two and a half hours of his stentorian Lutheran theology? I'm being a little dramatic here, for the philosophical problems are hardly parallel. Nietzsche scoffed at Wagner's Germanness, whereas what Johnson warms to in Bonhoeffer is his damning critique of Nazi Germany, propelled by motives even Nietzsche could hardly have despised. And while *Parsifal* reveled in a sensuousness diametrically opposed to its message, Johnson's dry, clean music has never in its life indulged a sensuous measure—even if here, the joyous repetitions of a "neue lied" eventually accumulated in a ravishing hedonism.

It's odd what happens to American composers after they live in Europe (and vice

versa). Johnson went to Paris writing rigorously geometric chord patterns for piano—"I want to *find* the music, not compose it," he liked to say—and came back writing a religious oratorio in German for four vocal soloists, large chorus, and orchestra. Had old J.S. Bach been present at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church on May 13, he would have largely understood what was going on. He might have been impressed with this slightly rough but fervent and highly committed performance of the Catskill Choral Society, the Hartwick College Choir, and the Catskill Festival Orchestra, all under the baton of Jirka Kratochvil. Unerringly effective were the four soloists—Johana Arnold, Anne-Lise Berntsen, Pal Rullestad, and David Barron—who for hours achieved a rich vocal urgency without overdramatizing the style.

It might have nonplussed Bach, though, that Johnson proceeded, not by the alternation of arias, duets, choruses, and instrumental interludes, but with broader minimalist strokes that deftly differentiated the four sections of the work. Part I opened with a baritone sermon on one pitch, expanding to two pitches in the next sermon, a couple more in the next, and so on, suddenly adding the entire brass section fortissimo, on a Brucknerian perfect fifth, at the

word "Repent!" Bonhoeffer's statements against the growing Nazi regime became sprechstimme recitatives in Part II, interrupted by moments in which the choristers stomped like storm troopers and glissanded into unison shouting. After intermission, Part III resolved the tension: The choir sang sermons on the importance of humility, the danger of "cheap grace," and the necessity of "a new song," in jazzy rhythms and endlessly recurring do-re-mi patterns. Part IV treated as spoken text letters that Bonhoeffer had written in his final days in prison before being hanged by the Nazis, after which the chorus somberly bounced brief phrases, such as "ohne Gott," back and forth in minimalist echoes.

The sermon-recitatives were the tricky part; there was no way you could ignore the content and listen merely aesthetically. "I don't like being preached at," I overheard one woman say after the tenor solo: "God you have taken control over me. . . . How could we know that your love was so painful, your grace so hard?" Yet, in hallowed Handelian tradition, Part III seduced us into the fold with music, weaving an endless web of melodies so simple that we lost count of their repetitions. By the end, we could echo what

choral titan Robert Shaw is supposed to have growled after a deeply moving performance of Charles Ives's *Psalm 150*: "That Goddamned piece could make you believe in Jesus Christ!"

One could object, of course, that Johnson has only done what Arvo Pärt did first, turn minimalism's potential ecstasy to devotional ends. But while Pärt's style draws a portentous saintliness from minimalism's chants and arpeggios, Johnson hewed to a precise, geometric conception of the style, relying on the simplest possible tunes and the accumulative effect of repetition. In fact, Johnson's Part III, couching its arias within an endless choral continuum,

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represented a new and effective oratorio conception—reminiscent, given Johnson's flattened-out style, of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, but with no resort to melodrama. By living in the music the austerity Bonhoeffer extolled in the sermons, Johnson rendered form and content inseparable, and made his message disturbingly difficult not to think about. **V**

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