

# The St. Matthew Passion, by John Reeves

reviewed by [Jill Peláez Baumgaertner](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

This book defies any effort to categorize it according to genre. To begin with, it is a series of meditations on one of the greatest pieces of Western music, J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. To that end, John Reeves, a composer and radio producer, helpfully includes the English libretto prepared by Edward Elgar and Ivor Atkins.

This little volume, however, attempts a multiple and complex series of other tasks. Its 21 poems are spoken by three separate, interspersed voices, the first of which is the author's as he considers eight locales where he has heard Bach performed. Then Reeves imagines Bach himself meditating on the Judenstrasse, the Jewish quarter near his church; the Agnus Dei; the Lord's Prayer; Gethsemane; his own chorales; the silence before and after music, the silence of Jesus before Pilate, and the silence of death; the cross as tree; and the Grunewald painting of the crucifixion.

The third voice is that of the church as it considers the Passion and the portions of the liturgy that enact it. In between the voices, Reeves inserts prose passages that orient the reader to the relevant portions of the Passion story, give helpful contexts for some of the author's poems about his experience with Bach's music, and relate the poems to appropriate parts of the liturgy. Ideally, then, in order to read this work completely, one needs to do some multitasking--playing Bach's music while reading the libretto, reflecting upon the author's prose introductions and reading the poems.

It is all very promising, and the poems occasionally rise to the occasion as in Reeves's fine poem about Kathleen Ferrier singing, "Ah Golgotha! Unhappy Golgotha," or when Reeves gives us Bach's voice saying:

Especially now, this holy week,  
this good day: all the linked  
pain and courage caught and sung, the bleak  
solitude, the silence figured forth in sound;  
and everywhere love, opening like a wound.

But often the poems are rather flat, and they appear to be no more than prose broken into poetic lines, as in the description of Bach's music as heard in Leipzig at Thomaskirche, Bach's church:

It is time to go:  
we crowd back into the church again  
for Part Two; ready, attuned. But before  
choir and soloist, conductor, orchestra, and organ  
can launch the opening movement, a local pastor  
mounts the pulpit (where Luther once preached)  
and briefly speaks: he bids us welcome; pays  
loving tribute to Bach, who so enriched  
this place and our lives; prays  
for the work of the parish; bravely insists on the faith,  
not the state, as the only trustworthy arbiter  
of truth; and then asks us to join with  
him in the Lord's Prayer.

In many passages like this one, the author displays no real sense of the rhythms of the poetic line or the importance of the sounds of language to poetic sensibility or the power figurative language can bring to a poem. In spite of these poetic deficiencies, one reads on anyway, knowing that Bach's music could redeem even the most prosaic of texts, just by association. In the end, the music is all.