Subject: Today's Recommendation: Easter
Posted by elektratig on Fri, 18 Mar 2005 18:14:28 GMT
View Forum Message <> Reply to Message

Today's entry is not about some obscure work. However, there was some talk about J.S. Bach in a recent thread, and Easter is upcoming, so a recommendation on one of the greatest musical works ever created seems in order.I won't go into a long description of Bach's life; you can read it on the web and elsewhere. What is most amazing about him to me is that the man was, for most of his life, a schoolteacher and town musician for a provincial municipality of no particular importance. He churned out close to several thousand works to make a living and support his large family (he had twenty children, ten of whom survived to maturity) and, sometimes (the Goldberg Variations and The Musical Offering come to mind), in the forlorn hope of gaining a more prestigious and better-paying position. After his death in 1750, he was all but forgotten for over seventy-five years. Many of his works were lost when his family threw or gave them away or used them for wrapping paper.Nonetheless, over a thousand works somehow survived, and Bach's fortunes began to revive in 1829, when Felix Mendelssohn (yes, that Felix Mendelssohn) organized and conducted a performance of the greatest of his works, and the subject of this post, the St. Matthew Passion.The Passion form is a species of oratorio, essentially an opera without staging, a vocal and orchestral work that depicts the betrayal, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. The German libretto that Bach used consists of biblical texts for the soloists (Jesus, Pilate, etc.) and crowds, interrupted by contemplative madrigal-like arias set to freely-composed verse and expressive four-part chorales. Bach apparently regarded the St. Matthew as the summit of his achievement, and rightly so. It was initially performed in the local church on Good Friday 1727 (one of his many jobs was to compose the music for church services each week, with extra special stuff on the big religious holidays), and he continued to tinker with it for the rest of his life. When it comes to describing the St. Matthew, I am at a loss, and my description would look silly: a succession of meaningless adjectives, "majestic", "sublime", "glorious" and the like. Suffice it to say that many, perhaps most, experts regard it as one of the great musical works ever created.Although the St. Matthew is intensely beautiful, whether it is something you will love upon first hearing is another matter. The Baroque vocal sound world is quite different from our own. Although there are scenes of great drama and turbulence (e.g., the choral crowd shouting for Jesus's death), there are periods of extended contemplation (e.g., solo arias reflecting on the meaning of Christ's suffering and death). If, for example, you don't enjoy Handel's Messiah (in particular, all those annoying parts other than the big choral pieces), you will probably not initially like the St. Matthew either. On the other hand, the St. Matthew is worth the effort. If you take the time to listen to it repeatedly and get to know it, you are rewarded with music that is beyond description.Now, for a performance. In broadest terms, there are two types –"traditional" and "period instrument". Generally speaking, traditional performances are by conductors and orchestral forces that typically perform mainstream 19th Century works (Beethoven, Brahms, etc.) using modern instruments. The forces tend to be bigger than original instrument groups and the pacing slower. The paradigm of this group is an EMI set, originally released in 1961, featuring Otto Klemperer conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra and Chorus, with world-famous soloists, generally from the operatic world, such Elizabeth Schwartzkopf.I have this set and enjoy it as a contrast, but my recommendation is a DG (Archiv) set featuring John Elliot Gardiner conducting the European Baroque Soloists. Gardiner is a highly-regarded specialist who has been producing outstanding performances of pre-Baroque and Baroque music for some 25 or 30 years. The orchestra

consists of hand-picked specialist musicians who are utterly at home in this repertoire. For any who may have heard bad things about period instrument performances, fear not: there is no bleating or blatting here. Likewise, although many of the vocal soloists may lack name recognition except in the Baroque area (although they do include Anne Sophie Von Otter), they are uniformly outstanding and perfect for this music.What sets Gardiner apart from Klemperer is pacing. Klemperer's Bach is so majestic and reverential that it sometimes becomes ponderous. Gardiner's quicker tempos and lighter touch propels the piece forward and makes it soar, without sacrificing any of its weight.Both the Klemperer and the Gardiner are three-discs sets (the St. Matthew is about three hours long), and I understand that that is a big investment. I'll therefore break tradition and propose two (or three as it turns out) other, more economical ways to hear this work. First, there is a one-disc "highlights" version of the Gardiner. Second, Naxos has come out with a version, conducted by Geza Oberfrank. I haven't heard it, but it has received good reviews. (Upon checking Amazon, I don't see the Naxos set; it may be out of print. There is, however, a one-disc highlights version, so you can get a taste for a mere $6.98.)One last word. Don't be put off by the religious nature of the work. You don't have to be Christian, or even religious, to love this work. Believe me, I know.
St. Matthew Passion