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FIRST NIGHT

## Markus Passion review — an astonishing rebirth for Bach's lost work

All the music for this 1731 piece was lost. But as the Dunedin Consort's concert proved at Snape Maltings, a new attempt to reconstruct it is completely gripping

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Clockwise from left: the soloists Matthew Brook, James Hall, Nicholas Mulroy and Anna Dennis had memorised the music

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### Today's Quizle

You may never have heard of JS Bach's Markus Passion, for a very good reason. All the music for the work — premiered in 1731, four years after the St Matthew Passion — was lost after Bach's death, though we do have the title page and the libretto.

Over many decades, however, Bach scholars have ingeniously deduced what the music might have been, drawing chiefly on Bach's *Trauer Ode*, which fits the passion libretto perfectly. Or they have supplied plausible alternatives. Now comes this remarkably persuasive performing edition by Malcolm Brun, which uses an actor to narrate the story between the sung choruses, arias and chorales (many of the latter familiar from Bach's St Matthew and St John Passions). Its British premiere here, by John Butt's fine Dunedin Consort at Snape Maltings as part of the Aldeburgh Festival, proved to be an astonishingly gripping 90 minutes of music drama. In part, of course, that was because Bach's music — so mellow, with two violas de gamba and two lutes prominent, and sinuous obbligatos for violin, flute and oboe soloists — provided a beautifully calm and meditative complement to St Mark's terse account of the passion story.

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But just as important was the way it was presented, in a sparse but emotionally supercharged staging by Bill Barclay. All four excellent soloists (Anna Dennis, James Hall, Nicholas Mulroy and Matthew Brook) had memorised the music, and they spoke and acted characters in the story as well. And sometimes the instrumental soloists stepped forward into the action too.

Meanwhile the actor Joseph Marcell offered a compelling narration, also from memory — one of the most perfectly paced, nuanced and dramatic deliveries of a biblical text I have heard. They should make him Archbishop of Canterbury; the pews would be packed.

There are opening and closing choruses but, inevitably, you miss the turbulent crowd scenes set to music by Bach in his other passions. Having three people shout "crucify him" doesn't quite have the same impact. That, however, is a small quibble. The musical poignancy and concentrated drama of this inspired reconstruction clearly made a huge impression on an audience that rose to its feet and cheered at the end — very unusual at Snape. Many more performances should follow.

★★★★★

Aldeburgh Festival continues to Jun 29, [brittenpearsarts.org](http://brittenpearsarts.org)

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