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Christmas celebrations with Marc Minkowski and Les Musiciens du Louvre in Budapest

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5-7 minutes

Preparations for the festive season can be experienced in various ways. The scenes of the jostling pre-Christmas bustle of any metropolis are familiar to all, as anxious shoppers hurry with bags of presents to get even more, children look excitedly at the displays of Christmas markets and the aroma of Gluhwein sold at street corner-stands permeates the crisp winter air. In stark contrast with that, on Thursday night, inside Műpa Budapest, a concert hall with excellent acoustics, built barely ten years ago, a different type of celebration took place. In their one-off guest appearance, the splendid early music ensemble from the French city of Grenoble, Les Musiciens du Louvre, under the direction of their founding conductor [Marc Minkowski](#) performed four cantatas from JS Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*.



Marc Minkowski

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This is a peculiar work, for a number of reasons. For starters, despite its commonly known name, it was (similarly to many other compositions of Bach, like *The Art of Fugue* or the two cycles of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*) never meant to be performed on one occasion in its entirety. The *Christmas Oratorio* is a collection of six cantatas, intended originally to be performed on the major feast days of the Christmas period. It is also worth mentioning that for much of this music, Bach freely reworked his own pre-existing secular cantatas. Musicians call this compositional strategy 'parody technique', something the Cantor of the Thomas Church often turned to, when running out of time but still in need of a new work for the forthcoming Sunday church service – a gruelling obligation fulfilled for several years as part of his job in Leipzig.

Les Musiciens du Louvre performed the first two, the fourth and the last of these cantatas, maintaining a feeling of unity, as the first and the last of them are in the same key, D major. The orchestration of each of these works is slightly different: while there is a string ensemble with a chorus and soloists in all of them, a variety of wind and brass instruments adds special colours to the individual compositions. Minkowski increased the dramatic effect of these instruments by positioning them on stage in every cantata in a different way. This mostly produced a remarkable effect of sonorities, notably without any loss of ensemble playing. For example, placing one of the flutes on the left side behind the strings, and another, mirror-like on the right (grouped with the oboes), made perfect musical sense. At other times, though, there were occasional balance problems as a result of this bold endeavour: at the very beginning of the concert (in "Jauchzet, frohlocket, auf, preiset die Tage"), the flutes playing a prominent part but standing behind the violins were practically inaudible, whereas the oboes, responding to the flutes' fanfare from the other side of the stage sounded clear.

One of the outstanding characteristics of Minkowski's impressive mix of sonorities was an unusual and truly pleasing blend of various

instrumental colours. Unlike the typically powerful sound of the brass instruments in a modern symphony orchestra, trumpets and horns in this performance were nimble, elegant and even occasionally hard to hear, as were the pair of natural horns at the beginning of the fourth cantata (“Fallt mit Danken, fallt mit Loben”). At the same time, the brilliant elegance of the trumpet obbligato in the final choral (“Nun seid ihr wohl gerochen”) of the sixth cantata helped the evening to arrive at an uplifting close.



Marc Minkowski and Les Musiciens du Louvre

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Period orchestras often opt for a neatly clipped, clearly articulated sound, where individual notes are slightly separated. In contrast, Minkowski's concept followed a slightly different path, as the strings played with a smooth bowing technique. This almost resembled an older performing style and it took me a while to get used to; however, notwithstanding a few occasions when more distinction would have helped the clarity, it was used consistently and, ultimately, convincingly.

The musicians under their conductor took generally light tempos. This was most refreshing in the opening numbers of all the four cantatas, where Minkowski's beats indicated a graceful, almost dance-like pulse of three. Dramatic music making this was, but certainly not heavy-going.

Similarly to some of the great early music ensembles, Les Musiciens du Louvre incorporates not just an orchestra but a chorus as well, which, on this occasion, also included the solo singers – a common practice in Baroque times. Seven members of the small vocal ensemble of eleven singers performed the solo parts on a reliably high artistic standard, stepping back into the tutti once their arias or recitatives finished. The impression of a single line of singers was striking and suggested an equality of roles, which was emphasised further by Minkowski thanking the enthusiastic applause of the audience and taking his bows together with his ensemble, standing not in front but among the musicians.