

## Bach's St Matthew Passion

JS Bach's St Matthew Passion is surely one of the greatest pinnacles of western music. It was a privilege to hear it in its entirety presented by the Salisbury Musical Society in the Cathedral last Saturday. The work calls for very large forces – three choirs, two orchestras, six soloists and continuo, and there was a wonderful atmosphere of expectation as the large forces assembled at the West end waited for David Halls to raise his baton to start the grand solemn opening chorus “Come ye daughters”. There followed over three hours of sublime music describing and reflecting on Christ's Passion. The sheer stamina of the performers, who had already rehearsed during the afternoon, was amazing – in fact the SMS choir seemed to reach a peak of beauty, balance and precision in the last three big choruses. The sopranos in particular shone brightly, no doubt because they were joined by the Cathedral choristers for many of the choruses. A one-hour interval was a very good idea for both performers and audience.

The work was sung in English using the new Novello edition published in 1997, with some further adaptations to the text used by the Evangelist (James Oxley). Jon Hampton provided interesting notes on the history of the English language editions. The programme also contained a “listening guide” with insightful short reflections by Simon Funnell on nearly half the 78 individual pieces of the work. This was a novel approach, which provided valuable stepping-stones for the audience. Unfortunately the full text was not provided – in the vast space of the cathedral it was often hard to hear the words, even with excellent diction from soloists and choir.

The long tradition of working with the Chelsea Opera Group Orchestra continues. For this concert they provided skillful accompaniment to the many recitatives and arias, with numerous expertly rendered solos from woodwind and strings. All four soloists, Julia Doyle, Anna Harvey, Thomas Elwin, Samuel Pantcheff, were consummate professionals, well able to sustain interest though lengthy *da capo* arias. A particularly beautiful moment was the duet for Soprano and Alto “Behold my Saviour now is taken” with the choir first interposing “Loose him, leave him, bind him not” before finally bursting into the dramatic “Have lightnings and thunders their fury forgotten?”

Two key persons in any Passion are the Evangelist who narrates the unfolding story, and Jesus himself. Here James Oxley and Henry Waddington performed their roles superbly, both with power and projection well able to fill the Cathedral, and absolutely clear diction. They were supported by the most distinguished continue playing of John Challenger (organ) and Joely Koos (cello).

Were there any disappointments in this outstanding evening? If there were it was definitely not the fault of the performers, but of the Cathedral acoustic. From halfway back in the Nave some of the smaller solos sung by members of the choir seemed very distant, and the Cathedral Choristers' ripieno chorale in first movement did not cut through the texture as convincingly as it should. But these are tiny quibbles and do not detract from an overwhelmingly moving performance, for which David Halls and the SMS deserve the great gratitude.

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