

Thames Philharmonic Choir's Monumental and Magnificent Bach Performance

Johann Sebastian Bach was a devout Lutheran, but this was no barrier to him composing gloriously rich compositions, full of drama, that celebrated his faith and helped to seal his appointment as Kantor at the Thomasschule (and conjointly that of civic director of music) in Leipzig, in which city was given the first performance of his *St John Passion* on Good Friday 1724. At a recent concert in All Saints', Kingston upon Thames, the Thames Philharmonic Choir recreated Bach's masterwork – one of many, of course – in a dazzling performance that further cemented the Choir's reputation for musical excellence in this its Golden Jubilee season.

The German text for the *St John Passion* was largely taken from the Lutheran Bible's version of *The Gospel according to St John*. Additional words came from the poetry of Barthold Heinrich Brockes and contemporary hymns. On this occasion, however, the Choir chose to use an acclaimed English translation of the text made by Neil Jenkins, the internationally celebrated tenor soloist who also played a central role in the performance as the narrator, musically reciting the words of the Evangelist. Jenkins combined a commanding presence with a rich, expressive vocal style that illuminated the text with clarity and brought the narrative vividly to life.

The work began, however, with a richly layered and monumental opening involving the Choir and the accompanying Thames Festival Orchestra in an extended, ecstatic hymn of praise: "Hail! Lord and Master;/every tongue shall offer praises to Thy name." The interweaving of the strings, the woodwind (the Lutheran tradition did not approve of brass instrumentation during Lent) and the different sections of the Choir provided a gloriously ethereal platform for the opening of the Evangelist's recitative.

Part One of the work tells the story of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane and of Jesus' arrest. Jenkins was aided admirably by short, but effective responses from Edward Grint as Jesus. His deep bass resonated majestically in the lofty expanse of All Saints'. Very fine contributions were also made by: distinguished bass, Michael Bundy, in the roles of Peter and of Pilate; by Katherine Crompton, a young soprano rapidly developing an enviable reputation in the international world of opera; by the alto Yvonne Howard, an established opera star (Royal Opera, ENO etc) and by the equally in-demand tenor, Mark Dobell, member of celebrated ensembles such as The Sixteen and the Monteverdi Choir.

The Choir punctuated the recitative with lively interjections, both sacred and profane, the most memorable of which in Part One were the deeply moving chorale passages, "O Lord, who dares to smite thee?/And falsely to indict thee?" and the even more exquisite, "Peter, with his faithless lies/Thrice denied his Saviour." This tragic and poignant episode brought to a close the first half of the concert.

Part Two – traditionally, this followed the sermon, sometimes an hour long! – opened with another magnificent chorale foreshadowing Christ's humiliation. The pattern of recitation and chorales followed through the narration of Christ's Judgement before Pilate and the Chief Priests, followed by His Crucifixion and Resurrection. The final chorale, "O Jesus when I come to die/Let angels bear my soul on high", brought the Passion to a close in a sublimely reflective vein, in contrast to the generally lively sound required until that point.

Throughout, the Choir rose magnificently to the challenges of singing with the necessary precision, urgency and feeling. As ever, the Thames Festival Orchestra, under its distinguished Leader, Adrian Levine, provided skilful, sensitive accompaniment. In this, they were complemented by the rich, finely judged contribution of the outstanding organist, Stephen Disley, from Southwark Cathedral. The contribution made by the continuo cellist, Pal Banda, also deserves a special mention.

Commanding these exceptional musical forces was Artistic Director, John Bate, who brought his attentive, yet seemingly unruffled style to bear in organising a performance that reflected wonderfully the rediscovered glories of All Saints' following its restoration. As well as being a triumphant element of the Thames Philharmonic Choir's Golden Jubilee season, it also marked Kingston Arts' opening concert of its *Festival of the Voice*. Such an auspicious occasion promises further musical riches for Kingston's concert goers, it must be hoped.

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17th March 2015