

Bach's St John Passion

Somerset Chamber Choir, under the baton of their conductor, Richard Laing, gave an engaging performance of J.S. Bach's *St John Passion* last Saturday, in the uplifting setting of Wells Cathedral, supported by the specialist Baroque ensemble, *The Musical and Amicable Society*, playing on period instruments. The soloists were James Gilchrist (Evangelist), Niall Anderson (Baritone), Rory Carver (Tenor), Sophie Gallagher (Soprano), Hamish McLaren (Counter-tenor) and Geoff Williams (Baritone).

First performed on Good Friday 1724 in the Thomaskirche, Leipzig, the St John Passion is surely one of the most moving and powerfully expressive of all the musical settings of the Passion and, as Richard Laing pointed out, in his programme notes and in a brief talk before the performance, 'some of the themes and episodes in the John Passion have frightening parallels with our own time.....the baying crowd calling for violence and mob justice is not without its counterpart today amongst populist movements the world over, and the law is used as a front for injustice.'

The St John Passion was to undergo a number of revisions before being cast in the final form we know today, in which Bach revoked many of his previous changes, restoring the original sequence of movements, at the same time re-scoring the music for a larger ensemble. Its solos and choruses follow the biblical text that relates the events leading to Christ's Crucifixion. The narrative is interspersed with contemplative reflections in the form of arias, using freely composed text, and chorales, made the more expressive by Bach's chromatic harmony.

Under Richard Laing's excellent direction, the opening chorus set the scene, with its tightly knit counterpoint and building up of dissonance over a G minor pedal in the organ and continuo, heralding the powerfully dramatic detached chords of the first choral entry *Herr, Herr, unser Herrscher*. Dynamics had been well thought out and helped shape the choral parts. There was a good balance between chorus and orchestra, though the very generous acoustics of the cathedral tended to blur the clarity of the semiquavers in the upper strings here and, later on in part two, in the two flute parts in the chorus *Schriebe nicht*.

The narrative, in the form of the recitatives, had a descriptive urgency and flexibility. James Gilchrist, singing the part of the Evangelist from the pulpit seemed to know every recitative from memory, as there seemed to be little recourse to looking down at the score. One almost felt that he was 'speaking' to us personally, in that there was such a compelling freshness and vitality that it tended to make one feel that the story was being narrated for the very first time. A crisp supporting continuo in all the recitatives gave the music a solid foundation and sense of direction.

The story unfolded captivatingly as one movement followed another with a well-judged sense of pace in the Chorales, with their beautifully nuanced cadences and the arias with their finely balanced instrumental accompaniment. Superb clarity of articulation in Hamish McLaren's, *Von den Stricken*, and expressive treatment of appoggiaturas in Sophie Gallagher's uplifting '*Ich folge dir gleichfalls*' are two examples which readily spring to mind. Equally uplifting was the lyrical singing of tenor, Rory Carver and Niall Anderson, the latter whose authoritative baritone added to the solemnity and gravitas of the text.

The Chorales were taken at a no-nonsense pace, which kept the story moving onwards and crisp articulation was a hallmark of the choral singing throughout, Richard Laing making sure that a fine balance was maintained in the ensemble, for example, the choral fugue *Wir haben ein Gesetz*, where the counterpoint was always clear and shapely. Elsewhere, moments of extreme expressiveness

contrasted with the dramatic energy and pathos inherent in the music and text, the rich baritone voice of Geoff Williams in the aria and chorus, *Eilt eilt*, contrasting with the dramatic choral interjections of *Wohin? Wohin?* to give but one example. Particularly memorable, also, was the shapely, haunting sound of the viola da gamba solo in the sorrowful aria *Es ist volbracht*, surely one of Bach's most expressive arias and the deft handling of twos against threes in *Mein theurer Helland*, where the solo and continuo are in 12/8 time against the 4/4 of the Chorale, truly an inspired movement.

The treatment of the final chorus, *Ruht wohl, ihr heiligen Gebeine* afforded a sense of space, dignity and reflection, culminating in the uplifting Chorale *Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein*, which brought this outstanding performance to a conclusion, with a fine sense of positivity, in the 'warm' key of E flat major and was followed by equally warm applause from the large appreciative audience in attendance.

Robert Langston, July 2019