

Dunbar Choral's Spring Concert 2016

Bach's St. John Passion

Review by David Affleck.

Until Saturday 14th May, I had not managed to attend a live performance of Bach's St. John Passion. Opportunities are rare. But I was familiar with the structure of the work, the narrative of the passion story, interspersed with input from individual singers, instrumentalists as soloists and in concert together, participants who were part of the story, singers who reflected on the message of The Passion as it unfolded, the scorn of the crowd demanding Jesus be crucified, all held together by the effectiveness of the evangelist as he sings the account of St John in a way that today's audiences can tune into. Would this complex interactive challenge be delivered with the various contributors playing their part?

Right from the start, the message was clear. The choir were going for it with the strong opening chorus of praise that developed with even more confidence in the repeat. As Matthew Minter, the evangelist, took us to the events in the Garden of Gethsemane, it was clear he had an ability to engage with the audience and tell the story in a musical form with a voice that had range, richness and authority. The composer's use of familiar Lutheran hymns intended for the congregation to join in but in this performance, sung by the choir, was sympathetically introduced as the scene in the garden ended. It was to feature on twelve occasions; Bach's way of involving the common people in the performance.

The first of the solo reflections with the intricate woodwind accompaniment fell to the alto, Katrine Townhill. The talent of the woodwind section with the solo cellist and harpsichord continuo supporting her rich delivery was clearly going to be demonstrated as the story unfolded. Bach then offers the soprano soloist the chance to show her skill. Susan Hamilton obliged with perfection in her joyful declaration to follow her Lord and Master, matched by the skilful flute accompaniment. The entry of Jesus sung by Richard Mein then takes place after the evangelist describes the questioning of him by the High Priest. Its significance is enhanced with the supportive playing of the organ continuo provided by David Townhill. The story moved on to the denial of Peter with Mike Towers the Tenor soloist facing the challenge of reflecting on Peter's desolation after the evangelist had described Peter's bitter weeping in a spine chilling way. The first half drew to a close with the third chorale praying for a new beginning, free from past wrongs.

The second part of the two hour performance picked up the story seamlessly. Peter Carey joined the story as Pilate, singing the familiar words from the gospel and catching the attention of the audience with his confident singing. The two complex choruses asked from the choir when the crowd reject Pilate's offers to release Jesus were delivered with

appropriate intensity. The bass and tenor soloists are then given the opportunity to share their thoughts on what the events mean to them. The story moves forward to the call that Jesus should be crucified with a rousing fugue sung to a high standard. Again a pause for a chorale which reflected most movingly on the suffering being borne by Jesus for all. Meanwhile the crowd demanded Jesus be crucified. The pace of the performance become more intensive as the evangelist led on to the Crucifixion. Orchestra, bass soloist and choir combined to create the drama of the event all of which had the full attention of the audience. The mood then changed with the words of Jesus, *It is fulfilled*. Katrine Townhill, the alto soloist, reflected on these words with the superb accompaniment from the cello and harpsichord "mourning" together. The Evangelist continued the story to the removal of the body for burial, with final contributions from the tenor and soprano soloists leading to the Choir's final chorus *Sleep well* sung movingly by the choir, supported by the orchestra and led by the conductor together as one. The full ensemble brought the performance to a final conclusion with powerful conviction singing in the great Lutheran tradition to the words, *Lord Jesus Christ, give ear to me and let me praise thee endlessly*.

How can the performance be summed up? On the evening of the 14th May at Dunbar, the performers of the St John Passion by J.S. Bach gave us the chance to experience what Bach himself must have also experienced, all founded on exceptional musical talent by the orchestra, soloists and choir supported by the continuo instrumentalists under the skilled direction of Vaughan Townhill. Bravo Dunbar Choral for taking on the challenge of this performance and delivering.

David Affleck.

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