

Three Spires Review: Paul Drayton's **The Passion of Christ as Told by Mark the Evangelist**,
21st March 2026

Paul Drayton willingly acknowledges the stylistic influences informing his writing, and **The Passion of Christ As Told by Mark the Evangelist** certainly evokes the worlds of Britten, Tippett, Shostakovich and other mid-twentieth century mainstream composers. But any temptation to play 'spot the references' is quickly dispelled as the personal musical identity of the piece emerges. As the programme note states, the work is generally slow and dark. If there is something of a dip in pace towards the end of the first half, (surprisingly perhaps, this comes at the moment of Christ's betrayal), on the whole, a wealth of ideas keeps the musical argument driving forward and the audience pinned to their seats.

The four solo voices are assigned the roles of narrator (soprano), Peter (tenor), Jesus (baritone) and Pilate (bass). Giving the narrator's part to the soprano was a neat device: replacing rather than adopting the role of the evangelist (who would more logically have been assigned a male voice). Not only does this help with balancing the vocal ranges and timbres but it also injects a novel objectivity into the narrative, in a sense moving it from first to third person. Soprano Laura Newey handled this role with confidence and flair, her pitch-perfect voice carrying well over the instrumental and choral support and delivering her lines with crystal clarity.

In a last-minute substitution due to the sad passing of Robert Rice, the character of Jesus was taken by Patrick Keefe, whose commanding resonant tone, more bass than baritone, lent the part a weight and gravitas that perhaps went further than the composer had originally intended but proved nonetheless to be a powerful interpretation of the role. It essentially reversed the sonic relationship between Jesus and Pilate. Oliver Morris's bass voice was a good deal thinner than Keefe's baritone, at times struggling slightly to be heard above his accompanying textures. On the other hand it did balance well with tenor Stephen Jeffes, whose equal lightness of tone gave a sensitivity and fragility to the part of Peter, as befitting his character.

While the composer had given careful consideration to the text, even down to making his own translations of the Greek Testament and Latin Vulgate, the changes are modest and might easily be missed. The language is subtly modernised, while the Passion's traditional chorales have been replaced with other Biblical sources and a small selection of poetry from the English canon. Parallels might be drawn here with Russell Pascoe/Anthony Pinching's **Secular Requiem**, but with the Drayton the device is not structurally central to the work, nor is it designed to draw the profound connections between the sacred and secular found in Britten's **War Requiem**. Where the chorale substitutions do make their mark is through being overlaid with beautifully crafted aria-like solos that ingeniously move the narrative forward at the same time as affording musical space for reflection. This emphasis on strong vocal melody is a distinctive characteristic throughout. As Britten knew when writing for children or non-professional groups, diatonic melodies can be placed upon dense chromatic textures to create music of great subtlety, mystery and complexity without leaving the voices struggling to find and maintain their notes or stay in tune.

The ever-inventive orchestration shows impressive restraint. Strings (led by Philip Montgomery-Smith) are joined by percussion (James Robinson), piano (Paul Comeau), harp (Katie McClaughry) and a single French horn (Lynn Henderson). The orchestra created some wonderful sonorities throughout the performance with crisp and precise tone, tight counterpoint and thrilling changes of energy and dynamic. Additional colour was brought to the work by the use of smaller ensemble combinations. Solo cello (Barbara Degener) joins violin and harp to support Peter's *'Even if I have to die with you'*; violin, viola (Ricarda Schmidt) and harp accompany Jesus's extended monologue *'Give ear to my prayer'*; harp, tam-tam and double basses provide a dark, menacing opening to Part

Two; extensive solo percussion leads into the epilogue and solo strings shimmer beneath the soprano's closing lines.

The choir too rose admirably to the demands made upon them. While the cathedral acoustic was less than forgiving of the rapid-fire interjections such as *'Not by me, surely?'*, the more extended passages - the choruses in particular - came through vividly and were performed with total commitment. The finest moment in the work for this reviewer was one such chorus: the setting of Psalm 38 for choir and solo tenor that concludes Part One, with extraordinary interweaving choral lines beneath Peter's heart-stopping solo.

There was one moment of uncertainty during the first half, perhaps the result of a missed cue, with what appeared to be a small section omitted. If so, then conductor James Anderson-Besant worked his magic to steer the ship calmly through troubled waters to bring everyone back together with barely a furrowed brow.

Continuing an occasional thread of twenty-first century choral works, **'The Passion Of Christ'** shows the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra undaunted by the challenge of bringing new work to Cornish audiences, even if the result is a less packed auditorium than when presenting more familiar choral repertoire. The coming season ensures a balance with Monteverdi's Vespers later in the year, preceded by their upcoming concert on 4th July of Dvořák, Vierne, Janáček, Widor and Dupré.

The choir is still seeking more male voices, and if you think you might be interested in joining please email membersthreespires@googlemail.com.

Chris Best 16/04/26

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