

St Matthew Passion

Bach

Truro Cathedral

Saturday 5th April 2025

Performing Bach's *St Matthew Passion* presents unusually wide-ranging challenges. In addition to the commonplace challenges of technical virtuosity for the chorus, the vocal soloists and instrumentalists, there is the scoring, for two distinct four-part choirs, two orchestras and a large group of soloists. And then there is the challenge of how to address, via musical performance, wide-ranging functions that include its roles as a devotional work intended for performance in a church building on Good Friday, as a dramatic work that tells a powerful story, all with a libretto that invites listeners to see themselves in so many of the characters.

As with his *St John Passion*, Bach revised this monumental work several times. Its first performance was in 1727, when he was 42; and his last minor revisions took place in 1746, four years before his death. The version generally performed today dates from 1736; and so that was what we heard in Truro Cathedral on April 5th, with the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra.

This performance had excellent moments; but overall it was not as consistent as the most recent concerts I have heard from this group. It was sometimes hard to nail down exactly why; but I found the most revealing point of comparison to be with a very different but no less challenging work, Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, which Three Spires presented last November. That performance was more consistently convincing, partly because late-Romantic music can thrive under a conducting style that shapes things by the phrase, which is exactly what James Anderson-Besant did on that occasion. However, that way of shaping is not necessarily as apt for Baroque music, which in general — and especially in elaborate ensemble works such as the *Matthew Passion* — needs to be driven by strong pulse as an underlying constant, with awareness of phrase-shape growing out of that constancy.

This was perhaps one of several reasons why there were occasional and quite noticeable problems with ensemble, sometimes within the choir and sometimes within the orchestras. Other reasons lie in the fact that St Thomas' Leipzig, the church building for which Bach was writing, was designed in a way that readily accommodated an ensemble of two distinct choirs and orchestras, while Truro Cathedral is not.

That said, this performance, sung in English, was always engaging. The choral tone was full-blooded, and responsive to shading of colour and dynamics; the chorales were beautifully shaped and paced, and several of the larger choruses were every bit the highlights they should be. That included the choruses at the end of Part One – the extraordinary dramatic discourse between soloists, chorus and orchestra which expresses what should be our response to the arrest of Jesus, “Behold, my Saviour now is taken” (“So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen”), and the chorale-based conclusion of that part, “O man, thy heavy sin lament” (“O Mensch, bewein’ dein’ Sünde gross”). Also, the rich-toned singing in the passion’s final chorus “We bow our heads in tears and sorrow” (“Wir setzen uns mit Thränen nieder”) was impeccably supported by a strikingly sonorous orchestral sound.

One of the most challenging aspects of this passion setting is the number and variety of soloists. Can some singers double-up in more than one role? Should they? This performance opted to have only one minor instance of doubling-up; and it was all the better for that. Roles with comparatively little music – characters in the biblical narrative such as Judas and Pilate – were ably taken by soloists who included members of the cathedral choir. And the larger roles were taken by a line-up of six, ranging in pitch from the aptly strong presence of bass-baritone Darren Jeffrey as Christus to the strikingly communicative singer of the several soprano solos, Sumei Bao-Smith.

I have encountered many different ways in which the role of the Evangelist is presented. Sometimes he has been impassioned, emphasising the dramatic

aspects of the Gospel text; and when done well, that approach can be entirely convincing. However, this performance featured an approach almost opposite to that, and it proved to be among the most memorable I have heard. Tenor Gopal Kambo's perfect diction, projected effortlessly and with beautiful tone, was not quite impersonal, but nor did it draw attention to anything other than the text as story, as if the Evangelist is a cipher for something much greater than he (and certainly the singer) is. Words, subtly intensified by music, spoke for themselves. Kambo thereby created a striking contrast between straightforward narration and the much more personal tone of the arias and accompanied recitatives sung by other soloists, and thereby between narration, drama and devotion — precisely calculated aspects of the story as assembled by Bach and his librettist Picander.

There were also many memorable solo contributions from members of the orchestra. These included the oboes in "Ah, Golgotha!", the viola da gamba in "Come, healing cross" ("Komm, süsßer Kreuz"), and flute in "For love my saviour now is dying" ("Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben").

In many of the intimate arias, especially those which invite the listener to reflect, to consider how these meditations might apply to us, the orchestral contributions were beautifully done. I especially remember the quiet and precise double-dotted violin playing in "All gracious God" ("Erbarm' es Gott"). Also the discourse between orchestral strings and violin solo in "Give, O give me back my saviour" ("Gebt mir meinen Jesum wieder"). In many of these arias James Anderson-Besant showed sound judgement in trusting the musicians: he put down his baton, letting them listen to one another and get on with it. On the whole this paid off handsomely.

The *St Matthew Passion* is one of the great things in all music, of all ages. But even in that context some pieces stand out; and surely, one of the standout pieces here, probably the standout, is the aria "Have mercy" ("Erbarme dich"), heard immediately after the scripture tells of Peter's betrayal.

The very concept is extraordinarily imaginative and aurally vivid — a trio for solo violin, counter-tenor and pizzicato bass, surrounded by a halo of quietly moving violins, violas and continuo chords. The beauty of the opening violin line, played with exquisite flexibility and finesse by Philip Montgomery-Smith was a more-than-good start. And then we got the stand-out of them all, in the singing of the very young (20-ish?) countertenor, Benjamin Irvine-Capel who was stepping in at less than two days' notice. Adjectives seem feeble, for this was among the most beautiful performances of that piece I have encountered, whether in live performance or on recording. Surely, his is a name that will become well-known.

Martin Adams

Martin Adams has lived in Camborne since 2016. Between 1979 and 2015 he worked in the Music Department of Trinity College Dublin as a lecturer and latterly as associate professor. In addition to his academic publications, he was for thirty years a frequent contributor of concert reviews to *The Irish Times*.