



St Matthew Passion

Judged by any yardstick, Bach's Passion Settings have to be ranked as amongst the greatest musical works ever written. Two survive to us today in complete form - the 'St John' of 1723 and that according to St Matthew of 1729. Parts of a setting of the narrative of St Mark's Gospel also survive. All of this music is in the important tradition of the Passion Oratorio. Of especial interest to the student of these expansive essays are their precursors from a mainly Hamburg-based school. Regular supporters of presentations by Sheffield Bach Choir will recall an acclaimed revival of Handel's lengthy *Brockes Passion* a few years back at St Mark's, Broomhill. It is well known this Passion of 1716, to the libretto of Barthold Heinrich Brockes - a work copied out in full by Bach and his first wife - contains elements that are notably present in the *St Matthew*: the use of strings for the accompaniment to the words of the Saviour, the contemplative arias - the texts of which comment upon the progress of the Passion Narrative - and the important use of choral dialogue. This last characteristic is wrought in wondrous fashion in Bach's *St Matthew Passion* by means of the use of double chorus and orchestra (and by their impressive combination). Particularly masterful is the 'scene-setting', yet powerfully rhetorical, opening chorus with its 'question and answer' textures all woven around the majestic chorale by the ripieno singers - *O Lamb Gottes, unschuldig*.

The *St John Passion* - an intensely dramatic work, scored for single chorus and orchestra - loses a deal when performed in English translation. Never as popular with English-speaking audiences as the *St Matthew* setting, the former's direct expression and fast-moving narrative have a power all their own which transcends the linguistic barrier and a summarised synopsis can still involve the listener in the work as a whole even when sung in a language other than his or her own.

The *St Matthew Passion* is altogether more reflective, and the individual's response is more crucial to the fulfilment of the listener; it is, as has been shown, on a grander musical scale (about twice as grand, in fact) and about an hour longer in duration. There are more chorale hymns deployed, and thus active participation through such congregational singing is the more easily achieved. The standard English translation of the Arias, Hymns and most of the Choruses is also of superlative quality. What is rather less satisfactory is the recitative in English; Sir Edward Elgar and Sir Ivor Atkins adapted Bach's musical rhythms to fit the Authorised or 'King James' version of the biblical story. While this expression may be said to lend great depth of expression to the *Christus* part sung by the Principal Bass, it is regrettable that some of the directness in the original vocal rhythms of the German text is, inevitably, lost in translation. I myself have incorporated minor modifications in some of the choruses, drawing partly on the pioneering work undertaken by the London conductor Denys Darlow [1920-2015] who directed performances in his new English version at the fashionable West End Church of St George, Hanover Square on Good Friday for many years. Amongst these adjustments may be mentioned an increasing directness in verbal expression, such as the substitution of the aggressive *To death with Him! He's guilty!* for the more passive and less involved *He worthy is of death* provided by Elgar and Atkins. However, we hope we have not made alterations simply for their own sake; this is not a performance in Darlow's new English concept - but rather a presentation in traditional language which, nonetheless, incorporates some of the more important theses presented by Darlow, and - indeed - other leading choral conductors, over many years. We have tried to keep, wherever possible, to Bach's musical rhythms in order to achieve as near a result as we may in consort with the composer's artistic intentions.

Yet, it is crucial to remember that the Passion is not - in essence - a concert-piece. All the oratorios in the stupendous Lutheran heritage were composed for liturgical performance - that is, presentation within the context of public worship. This is a long tradition in England too, going back many generations almost to the period immediately following Mendelssohn's notable revival of the work for its celebrated centenary performance of 1829 in Berlin. Here, in Yorkshire, previous custom - to which the Sheffield Bach Choir performances are notable exceptions - had tended to be either to truncate the work to make it suitable for one sitting or to perform it on two consecutive evenings in Holy Week. Today's revival - as in the earlier presentations at Sheffield in recent years - finds the work given in its entirety beginning early on a Saturday evening with audience participation in the much-loved Chorale Hymns.

This masterpiece comprises the culmination of the musical development of the setting of the Passion story - a process that may with ease be traced through the simply inflected, yet immensely moving, Plainchant Passions by way of the additions of polyphonic 'turba' (crowd) choruses by Renaissance Masters such as Byrd and Victoria through to the Motet Passions of composers like J C Demantius and the narrative settings of Heinrich Schütz. All these works have involved their composer's personal response to 'the greatest story ever told' - a tale of divinity portrayed as the suffering servant from Isaiah's prophecy,



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whereby the tree of the gallows became the tree of glory - the 'one reliance' of humanity as St Venantius' glorious hymn has it. Truly may we all share the mourning of the daughters of Jerusalem expressed so powerfully in the intense music from which Bach's peerless setting unfolds.

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