

BEDFORD CHORAL SOCIETY

Bach St. John Passion - March 2009

Saturday evening's performance of Bach's shorter setting of the passion story was a very satisfying one, to this recent member, at any rate. Compared to the St. Matthew, it has the slight advantage of being manageable in length – no da capo arias and about fifty pages shorter in the score; so it fitted nicely into a two-hour slot, with just two arias omitted.

High profile performances of the great baroque masterpieces these days are usually given by a chorus of 16 – 40 singers, probably professional or semi-professional. I suppose they set a bench-mark for larger amateur choruses to aim for; it is hard to match their unanimity of attack and athleticism in rapid passages, but I must say the BCS did pretty well on Saturday.

Over the years, our conductors have dared to suggest that the basses were inclined to sing behind the beat (perish the thought). I was not aware of any laggards; the unanimity and the precision of the rapid runs seemed very pleasing. Watching the conductor? Generally quite good; and so it should be, given the tiering for the choir, giving everyone a good view of the conductor. (Incidentally, I often felt in rehearsal at Biddenham that with a level floor, and the conductor perched precariously on a gym bench, watching the conductor was, for some very hard to do. Would it not be a good idea for the Society to ask a carpenter to make a proper podium? I am sure the School could find it useful as well).

To state the obvious, the Passions are musical dramas, and the staging was excellently managed; the all-important Evangelist, superbly sung by Alexander Sprague, was placed well away from the other soloists, whose role is either to be participants in the drama, or to reflect on the events. Michael's judgment for pacing the unfolding of the work was, as ever, immaculate, with minimal gaps where the narrative demanded it. The tempi of the chorales, too, were related to mood and word content. What a wonderful collection of youthful soloists had been engaged!

For choral performances with orchestra, one always hopes that the balance can be achieved; with a baroque-sized orchestra this should not be a problem and this was indeed the case on Saturday, with members of the highly competent Bedford Sinfonia. Together with my companion for the evening – a soprano from the 60's and 70's – we both found it a very pleasing performance in all respects.

Ken Laffin

March 22nd 2009