

## BACH – St Matthew Passion

St John's Church, Harpenden  
25 March 2015

**Johann Sebastian Bach: St. Matthew Passion, BWV 244**  
Amici Voices, Amici Baroque Players and St John's Church Junior Choir, directed by Terence Charlston

Since their formation in 2012 *Amici Voices* and *Amici Baroque Players* have continued to deliver stylish performances of German Baroque repertoire, particularly in music by Johann Sebastian Bach. Three years on, the members of *Amici Voices* are all now experienced consort singers and soloists in their own right, and their reputations, both as individuals and an ensemble, are steadily growing. *Amici's* recent performance of the *St Matthew Passion* was characterised by vocal aplomb and sensitivity as well as instrumental flair, especially from the wind and continuo players, all of which were enhanced by Terence Charlston's stylish direction, most readily manifest in his judicious tempo choices.

The revival of "the great Passion" as the work was known in the Bach family, and indeed the canonic position still occupied by the music of J.S. Bach, is a result of judgement exercised by Carl Friedrich Zelter as much as by his prodigious pupil Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Zelter had studied in Berlin with Johann Philipp Kirnberger who had himself been a pupil of Bach's in Leipzig. In 1800, when Zelter succeeded Carl Friedrich Fasch as conductor of the Berliner Singakademie, works by Bach continued to form an important part of the choir's repertoire. Indeed, Mendelssohn's acquaintance with Bach's music began in Zelter's company during the early 1820s. For Christmas 1824, Mendelssohn's paternal grandmother, Fromet Guggenheim, commissioned a copy of Zelter's own score of the *St Matthew Passion* for the fifteen-year-old Felix. Under Mendelssohn's direction some five years later, the work was heard for the first time since Bach's lifetime. Mendelssohn's performing score, now housed in the Bodleian Library, bears witness to his decisions to omit over 20 musical numbers, to add both prescriptive and descriptive performance directions, and to make changes in instrumentation, some of which resulted in the necessity to replace instruments no longer in use with those more readily available. If we regard Mozart's reworking of music by Handel during the late 1780s (*Acis and Galatea* K566 in 1788 and *Messiah* K572 in 1789) as precedents, then Mendelssohn's own approach reflects his desire to ensure a practical and viable rendition of Bach's score for Berlin of the late 1820s. Mendelssohn's performances undoubtedly helped germinate the seeds of the Bach revival begun by Fasch and Zelter; however, it seems most likely that the printing of the score of the *St Matthew Passion* in 1830 secured the work's rise to canonic immortality.

In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, we are able to savour the many ways in which historically-informed performances of the *St*

*Matthew Passion* bring to life certain aspects of its early genesis. It is now over 30 years since Joshua Rifkin justified his belief in the validity of one-voice-per-part performance tradition. This approach was adopted by Charlston and as a result, *Amici's* performance more easily enabled listeners to reconcile this concert presentation of such explicitly sacred music, as opposed to offerings which accord more closely with what Sir John Eliot Gardiner has termed "the traditional 'choral society' approach"! In practical terms, St John's Harpenden, Charlston's choice of venue, embodies more of the acoustics (not to mention the feelings of veneration) one experiences in Leipzig's Thomaskirche than, say, London's Royal Festival Hall: historical-style performance does not merely need all aspects to be identical!

From the very opening of this, *Amici's* second performance of the *St Matthew Passion*, the work's majestic but solemn grandeur was convincingly captured. *Amici Voices* were divided into two choirs, each of four voices, variously sharing solo and ensemble roles. The blend of Choir 2 (Rachel Ambrose Evans, Helen Charlston, Cameron Richardson-Eames and Jonathan Pacey) was particularly sympathetic to the many chorales distributed throughout the work. Other successful combinations included Bethany Partridge and Guy James's duet 'So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen'. Amongst the soloists, the bass Michael Craddock and mezzo soprano Helen Charlston deserve special mention. Craddock's 'Ja, freilich will in uns das Fleisch und Blut'/'Komm, süßes Kreuz' had conviction and authority, and was ably complemented by the gamba of Jan Zahourek. Similarly, Craddock shone in 'Am Abend, da es kühle war'/'Mache dich, mein Herze, rein'. Having heard Helen Charlston in *Amici's* previous performance of the *St Matthew* (notably in 'Ach Golgotha'/'Sehet, Jesus'), her solos this time – 'Du lieber Heiland du'/'Buß und Reu' and 'Erbarm es, Gott!/'Können Tränen meiner Wangen' –



displayed those qualities of her voice which have helped firmly establish Charlston on the professional scene. Hiroshi Amako's performance as the Evangelist was characterised by commitment and stamina. His appearance early in the work, for 'O Schmerz!'/'Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen' allowed Amako to explore the more gentle aspects of his voice, free from recitative's narrative primacy.

Plaudits also to those instrumentalists who gave such life to the distinctive 18<sup>th</sup>-century instrumental sonorities of oboes da caccia and d'amore, Baroque flute and viola da gamba, particularly as soloists in the work's poignant arias. The mastery with which *Amici's* wind players supported the solo voices in many of the work's most dramatic moments deserves specific mention here. Flautists Ashley Solomon and Marta Goncalves, in the recitative/aria 'Du lieber Heiland du'/'Buß und Reu' complemented mezzo Helen Charlston's characterisation of the intimacy of the woman of Bethany's kindness towards Jesus. In the hands of Gail Hennessey and Geoffrey Coates, the oboes d'amore in 'Wiewohl mein Herz im Tränen schwimmt'/'Ich will dir mein Herze schenken' enhanced Rachel Ambrose Evans's bitter-sweet portrayal, and the dance-like tempo of the aria was particularly pleasing. *Amici's* performance was a reminder of just how profoundly the use of historical wind instruments brings this music to life, particularly in those numbers which so delightfully combine flute and oboe timbres. As well as 'O Schmerz!'/'Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen', mentioned above, further delightful wind sonorities were heard in 'Er hat uns allen wohlgetan'/'Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben'. Indeed, Ashley Solomon's performance of the obbligato in 'Aus Liebe' was nothing short of revelatory. Bach's use of oboes da caccia in the recitative and aria 'Ach Golgotha'/'Sehet, Jesus' is another high point, and here Gail Hennessey and Geoffrey Coates, in support of Guy James, did not disappoint. An excellent complementary programme included informative and authoritative notes on the work, as text and act, respectively by Olwen Foulkes and Terence Charlston, further enhancing the evening's listening.

*Amici Voices* made its international debut last year on Good Friday in Oudenaarde, Belgium. The year 2015 has seen a new expansion of both the repertoire and permutations of the group, with explorations of two-, three- and four-voiced secular and sacred vocal music from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. With *Amici's* reputation for consistently high-quality music-making justifiably assured, I wonder if Charlston might now be persuaded to reveal the delights of other, possibly less well-known, 18<sup>th</sup>-century sacred works.

Ingrid Pearson

***Missa Cantantibus organis:*  
*Palestrina and the Roman School*  
*Conductor: Andrew Parrott*  
*Trinity Chapel, Cambridge, 25 April***

*De Profundis* was established for performing continental Renaissance polyphony in Cambridge with a series of conductors, in this case Andrew Parrott. The first half began with plainchant followed by Palestrina's *Cantibus organis* a5, the chant having a shorter text than the Palestrina – ask Bruno Turner: fortunately, we happened to arrive together. The rest of the first half had motets by Annibale Stabile (*Quam pulchrae sunt* a5), Victoria (*Vidi speciosam* a6), Palestrina (*Expurgate vetus* a8 & *Salve Regina* a12), and Felice Anerio (*Ad te levavi* a8). The standard a cappella programme is varied by diminutions and organ reductions by David Jarratt-Knock (cornetto) and Edward Tambling (organ, as well as editor of most of the music).

After the interval, the whole of the *Missa Cantantibus organis* a4, a8 and a12 was the complete work, with seven composers (*Stabile, Soriano, Dragoni, Palestrina, Giovanelli & Mancini*). It is possible that the *Missa* was organised by Anerio, hence his presence in the first half. The thematic basis comes from the chant and the opening motet. If I'd realised that, I'd have gone through chant and score before the concert (though having written that, I realised that my *Le opere complete* vol. viii must either be in Fitzwilliam College or a barn some several centuries old in Godmanchester!) This isn't the first performance, and one wonders whether the "editing" was merely changing the clefs.

Bruno was, at least tongue-in-cheek, surprised to see the term *alto* used for the top part. There have been various discussions on when they started to use that range by men adjusting to falsetto. There are tenors who can more-or-less keep to their range but spread upwards a bit. But it might have been easier to use trebles till they were genuine falsettists. I'm not sure what the name for A-T-Bar-B is – male-verse choirs normally are for broken voices. The texture sounded fine as far the range went, but I wasn't entirely happy with the sound. Somehow there was too much expression, with almost a different sound or volume for each note; unless the phrase is small, the opening and closing word only works if the separated words are both significant. I'm not sure if the barer openings sound better because there are fewer singers, or the problem might be Trinity College's chapel, either because of where we were sitting (middle of the top row south side) or because it was a general weakness. The separate choirs should surely have been better placed: with so large a space, the three choirs should have been in the left and right sides in the usual College separation with a third choir at the west end. Surely Mark Dourish could have arranged some such layout?

Nevertheless, it was a worth-while event which I was glad to hear – but do stop having separate choirs squashed at the east end! And do get Andrew back again... CB