

Passionate Bach

Doncaster Choral Society's Spring 2009 offering was Bach's *St John Passion* (Priory Methodist Church, 28 March): not by any means the first time the Society have programmed it, but for me they can rarely, if ever, have sung anything better or even as well, as this. From the powerful first note of the massive opening chorus, this performance announced itself with fierce commitment and those lucky enough to have been there will remember it. The choral element in a Bach Passion is tripartite: big set piece choruses, just two here, one at either end, both peaks of the choral repertoire; brief, or relatively brief, crowd interjections which generate excitement in what are essentially intensely dramatic works and which did so here in **Alan Eost's** admirably paced reading; and chorales, eleven of them in *St John*, which comment simply and movingly on the action, and, because they are settings of hymn tunes which the original congregations knew well, were a means by which they could take an active part in the performances. The *St John* ends with one, rather than (like the *St Matthew Passion*) with a deeply tragic major chorus (which here immediately precedes it) and this underlines the *St John's* essential intimacy. The choral performance on this occasion somehow expressed both that intimacy and the drama inherent in the Passion format.

The six soloists contributed greatly to the overall sonic picture. **Stephen Liley**, admirably clear in delivery and diction, must surely be one of the outstanding of contemporary Evangelists, and the rich, positive warmth of **Terence Ayebare's** Christ was also memorable – a small role if one reckons it by the number of its notes, but a huge one measured by its intensity. I was deeply impressed with the bass **Georg Gädker**, surely a singer with a fine future. He came into his own in the long second half, not merely for his arias – one with choral interjections by the choir – but for the reading of the role of Pilate, which Bach, through *St John's* Gospel, makes much more of (and more sympathetically so) than he did in the *St Matthew*. Another soloist with surely an excellent future is the tenor, **Andrew Dickinson**, who showed little or no outward sign of the severe back pain which was troubling him, singing his arias with passion (small p!) and the greatest determination. Both lady soloists performed excellently despite the rather different handicaps of taking over at short notice, in soprano **Jenny Leadbeater's** case, the notice being no more than a few hours. However she is well known, not only to the Society, but to other local ones as an experienced and stylish Bach exponent and her two arias went well, as did those of contralto **Jeanette Ager**, not least the superb 'All is fulfilled', one of Bach's finest imaginations, with its incandescent viola da gamba obbligato.

Which brings me to the highly capable instrumental support of the **South Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra**, both as a whole and in solo obbligati in which Bach's Passions abound – here oboes (with a cor anglais prominent in one number), bassoons, violins and flutes, as well as the cello. Nor must we forget organist **Ronald Law** who at one point eagerly embraced obbligato statues as well.

An inspiring evening all round and large audience to enjoy it.

Orpheus