

St Albans Choral Society performed Bach's St John Passion

Last Saturday's performance of Bach's St John Passion, with Orchestra Nova and six soloists, conducted by its Music Director George Vass, fully conveyed both the drama and the emotional power of this timeless work, which tells and reflects on the events leading to Christ's crucifixion.

The story is a setting of two Chapters from St John's Gospel, with short additions from St Matthew, in Martin Luther's translation, and this performance was given in German. The narration was led by the Evangelist, a long and demanding high tenor role. Mark Dobell vividly and masterfully characterised its variety of moods, from simply descriptive to dramatic, sorrowful, confrontational, contemplative or resigned. Christ was sung with dignity by bass baritone Edward Grint, while baritone Felix Kemp eloquently presented Pilate as an honourable man in a situation he could not fully comprehend.

This biblical text is interspersed with solo arias providing devotional commentary. Soprano Kirsty Hopkins and tenor Greg Tassell movingly conveyed their horror at what they were anticipating or witnessing while fluently negotiating long high-lying lines. Mezzo-soprano Rebecca Afonwy-Jones conveyed the pathos of "It is finished", intensely poignant but with a brief martial passage representing Christ's triumph in death. Felix Kemp sang the bass solos with a searching sincerity. They were elegantly supported by continuo players cellist Katherine Jenkinson and organist Christian Wilson.

The chorus plays an especially prominent role, as both active participants and commentators. St Albans Choral Society rose powerfully and tirelessly to the challenge. In the narrative choruses, as high priests, Roman soldiers or the people, their entries were confident, their diction was clear despite the often fast-moving music and they brought to life the mockery and violence in their role. In the chorales, commenting for the Church at large, they sang with a moving simplicity, in one place providing a delicate underlay for Felix Kemp.

With well-judged speeds and shaping of individual numbers, skilful handling of the continuity between the Evangelist and the choir during Jesus' trial and careful balancing of his large forces, George Vass sustained the dramatic momentum while allowing the more contemplative moments due space to register. A memorable evening.

Alan Nafzger