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Combined Forces for Good in Bach Passion

by Joel Schwindt

On April 3, Seraphim Singers and Emmanuel Orchestra presented J.S. Bach's *Passion According to St. John*, BWV 245. The concert was hosted by Saint Paul Church of Cambridge, whose adult choir joined the Seraphim Singers. Jennifer Lester led the ensemble; the founder of Seraphim Singers, she is also an active recitalist on the organ. Veteran tenor Mark Sprinkle served as the evangelist, a role he has sung for a number of groups in the Boston area, including the Chorus Pro Musica and the Handel and Haydn Society. Organist Heinrich Christensen is music director of King's Chapel. The performance featured a number of vocal and instrumental soloists, including both professional and amateur singers, most of whom are based in the Boston area.

The performance was a successful rendition of Bach's great work, with a high level of emotional engagement and musical competence, despite a handful of technical and artistic shortcomings. The ensemble offered some clear dynamic phrasing and characteristic contrasts, though with less clear representation of the larger shapes within the work. Lester also struggled to create secure ensemble entrances during fast-moving transitions between solo narration and ensemble performance.

Sprinkle's performance of the role of the evangelist was very rewarding, offering expressive and communicative narration

and impressive familiarity with the expansive role. Jesus was sung by chorus member Michael Olbash, whose warm sound supported a dramatic rendition of the role that was quite moving. Pilate was also sung by a member of the chorus, Taras Lescheshin; although his performance was charged with a great deal of dramatic power, the vocal style occasionally tended toward the strident. The members of the Emmanuel Orchestra, as soloists and as members of the ensemble, gave an expressive and elegant performance, with only a small number of technical issues.

In general, the singers performed the choruses of the first half of the program with technical efficiency and appropriate variations of character and dynamics as well as a clear understanding of the events which they were portraying (that is, Jesus's arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, followed by Peter's denial). The first half also featured a number of vocal and instrumental solos; outstanding among the vocalists was soprano Kelly Hopkins, whose rendition of "Ich folge dir/I follow you" (a proclamation of the believer's faithfulness) displayed not only her vocal power and agility, but also an impressive amount of endurance, as she skillfully navigated Bach's long-breathed vocal lines. Among the instrumental soloists, oboists Barbara LaFitte and Jane Harrison offered a delightfully elegant duet in support of the aria "Von den Stricken meiner Süden/To untie me from sins" (a song expressing hope for salvation). I was particularly grateful that, in closing the first half of the program, Lester did not invite applause, but left the stage (and the drama) with respectful silence.

In the second half of the program (Jesus' trial and crucifixion), the Seraphim Singers took the prominent role; the adult choir of Saint Paul Church performed only the chorales, though it did join the Seraphim singers for the final chorus. As the intensity

of the drama increased during Jesus' trial, the chorus depicted this rise in agitation with a rise in energy and intensity (in this section of the passion narrative, the chorus represents the Jewish authorities and people who were seeking Jesus' execution), though their dynamic range became more limited, generally moving only between mezzoforte and fortissimo. The group returned to its broader expressive palate with an impressive display of dynamic contrast in the aria and chorus, "Eilt, ihr angefochtenen Seele/Hurry, you tempted souls" (a call to Golgotha to receive salvation).

Similar to the end of the first half of the program, the group provided very dramatic impact with a long silence following the narration of Jesus' death. The aria which immediately follows, "Es ist vollbracht/It is finished" (a promise of hope in the darkest night), featured mezzo-soprano soloist Teri Kowiak, whose warm sound supported her strong contrasts of character between the aria's mournful and triumphant sections, offering a true dramatic reading of the text. Viola da gamba player Laura Jeppesen's accompaniment in this selection was light and effective. Exceptional among the instrumentalists in the second half of the program were violinists Danielle Maddon and Lena Wong in their obbligato duet in the arias "Betrachte, meine Seel/Contemplate, my soul" and "Erwäge, wie sein blutgefärbter Rücken" (both texts which contemplate Jesus' suffering); these soloists affected a lyrical, elegant style, as well as a number of long-breathed musical shapes.

The performance closed with the the chorus, "Ruht wohl/Rest well" (a benediction over Jesus' body), followed by the closing chorale. The first selection conveyed the tone of the play's sorrowful close (in keeping with its liturgical function, the play ends immediately following Jesus' death), to which the group brought a great deal of emotional fervor. To create a more

stirring finish to this concert performance, Lester also added a long crescendo over the course of the final chorale.

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