



## No lack of drama in Bach's St. John

For their spring concert last Saturday the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society performed the St John Passion by Johann Sebastian Bach under their excellent conductor, Matthew Owens. Less often performed than the St Mathew Passion the work is very dramatic and provides considerably of opportunity for the participants to display their interpretive skills. In this the large audience in the cathedral was not disappointed.

After the long orchestral introduction, the chorus entered with great conviction and immediately grabbed the attention. The ensuing florid passages were less secure but order was soon restored. Indeed, the precision of the chorus in later sections of the piece was most impressive. In particular the interjections of the mob in the interrogation section were quite spine-tingling and in the bass aria, "Eilt, ihr angefochtenen Seelen" the trickily placed cries of "Wohin" ("where to") were accurately delivered - clearly much hard work had been done in rehearsal.

For your reviewer, some of the greatest pleasure of the evening came from the beautiful rendition of the chorales. So often these can sound turgid. Here they were given at a flowing tempo with subtle phrasing. The diction of the chorus was excellent and the blend of tone and the balance between the parts was exemplary.

The key part of the Evangelist, who narrates the events as they unfold, was taken by the eminent tenor, Rogers Covey-Crump, who is one of today's leading exponents of the role. His attention to the text was as one would expect and he played a key role in moving the drama forwards.

The part of Jesus was sung by the bass, Christopher Sheldrake, who engaged our sympathy. He was less successful, however, in the arias where Bach's tortuous melodic lines, at times, taxed his intonation.

Pilate was sung by Dominic Bowe, a young bass, who hails from this locality. He gave an authoritative account of the role. He possesses an attractive, clear toned, voice and should have the prospects of a good career ahead. The soprano was Ali Darragh who has a bright, agile instrument albeit with an occasional slight edge. Alto Simon Clulow, another local artiste, delivered his two arias with confidence. He was especially moving in the second one. The remaining soloist was Mark Hounsell who has a fine ringing tenor. In his second aria he impressed with his control of the long phrases.

Under-pinning the performance were the talented players of the Music for Awhile Orchestra playing on period instruments. Special acknowledgement should be given to the excellent obligato players on pairs of flutes and oboes.

Thanks must go yet again to the inspired direction of Matthew Owens who continues to raise the standards of the society.

**Brendan Sadler, March 2014**