

RAISING STANDARDS



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It is a work that defines Holy Week for many people around the world. Over the course of two articles, **David Hill** suggests ways of preparing and organising performances of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*.

The *St Matthew Passion* is a work of central importance when examining the value and significance of western culture. Bach took to new heights the musical portrayal of the Passion and its place within Christian worship as part of Lent and Holy Week. It is a work of extraordinary power, Bach deploying every possible aspect of composition, sound, and dramatic elements imaginable.

Mounting a performance of the *St Matthew Passion* is a major event and over two articles I will explore how the task can be made easier through judicious planning of rehearsals so as to utilise singers and players in the most efficient way.

Which language?

There is always a compelling argument to present music in the vernacular, particularly when a performance is treated as an act of worship. This is true as much for opera as it is for a work such as this. Use of the vernacular equals a greater directness and immediate understanding of the narrative by the audience or congregation. It is, of course, much more straightforward for the choir. Then some would argue that the construction and syntax of the German language is so inextricably linked to the music that only when sung in German is the spirit of the music and text fully realised. Soloists prefer to sing it in German, some refuse to sing it in English. In truth, there is no 'right' way: it is a matter to debate with those involved. The Bach Choir has sung it (in English) to tens of thousands over the years in the annual performance at the Royal Festival Hall – long may that continue. It is hoped that in 2014 the Choir will also perform it in German, both in the UK and Far East, and we are looking forward to that too.

Editions

If in German, Bärenreiter; if in English, Novello (which also has the German text). The Bärenreiter English translation is perverse, not ideal for performing purposes. Neil Jenkins has taken great care in his version for Novello and, although not everyone will agree with his views all of

the time, it is a very good edition from which to develop your performance and is the one to which I will refer. For numbering purposes, I shall abbreviate as follows: N = Novello; B = Bärenreiter.

The music

I was very fortunate at Chetham's to have two inspirational teachers and mentors: Robert MacFarlane and John Leach. Robert came over as refreshingly eccentric and expressed, very clearly, musical mechanics and how we should view them. When talking about Bach he would say, 'Mr Hill ... you must understand his music is placed within the concept of dance ... that element must always be present.' I have never forgotten that; he is totally correct.

The opening movement is enormous and must feel as if everyone is being gathered together to witness what is about to happen. The lower strings provide the heartbeat on top of which Bach writes a wonderfully harmonised melody [Ex.1].

Conductors Ask the lower strings to propel the music along. It should be stately, never hurried but with forward movement and direction. Matching the phrasing, colours and dynamics between the instruments and voices are key in creating a balanced sound. Think in 1 beat per bar, not 4.

Singers Invite the congregation / audience into the story with clearly enunciated text and thoughtful phrasing. Choir 2 interjections should be questioning, not aggressive.

The role of the **Evangelist** is crucial in how the drama of the work unfolds. My view is to allow the tenor and continuo players to work separately in focusing their contribution to the work.

There will be points of interpretation a conductor may wish to add but it is not a good idea to be controlling each move they make. The narrative needs to flow and the tenor and continuo players should act as chamber musicians. However, the arrival of **Christus** within the recitative does require very clear beating from the conductor. This is not easy and it is important to rehearse Christus separately before seeing the orchestra.

Conductors The delineation of beats in the bar is critical for the string players. Beat slightly ahead of when a change of chord is required. The conductor is an accompanist throughout these passages.

Chorales

These are staging posts, reflecting on the drama as it unfolds. These marvellous Lutheran chorales must be led by the text in terms of pace and mood. The pauses are breaths but should be used flexibly and depending on the music and text.

Conductors Recitatives N4/B4a and N6/B4e: use the final phrase of the recits to establish the tempo of the following chorus. The chorus interjections need strong textual projection and the overall style of choral articulation needs to match that of the

Ex.1 In the opening, thinking broadly of 1 in a bar will help to propel the music along

Ex.2 N26/B19: creating a sense of a lullaby by phrasing the couplets enhances the text

orchestra. Buoyant, lithe, slightly aspirated semiquaver passages will work best, avoiding too much legato.

Avoid big gaps between the music so that all involved as performers and listeners are kept connected. Depending on where it is you are performing the work, it is often a clearer balance and better ensemble between vocal and woodwind soloists if the wind players either a) stand, or b) come next to the soloist, e.g. N9/10 or B5/6 and N18/19 or B12/13.

In N20/B14, the Vivace is tricky to control; the bass soloist needs to establish the tempo to the strings to take up. By a clear 4th beat in bar 7 in the new tempo, the conductor should be able to take control of the situation. I always avoid a rit. into the moderato as the semiquavers rarely sound together in the attempt. The drama is maintained until the chord is established on beat 3.

Singers Making the choral elements sound effortless in N26/B19 is worth the effort. Phrasing is central to what is required, alongside breathing early and thinking the first sound before placing it. Additionally, the anacrusis quaver needs to sound light but not too short – as if it is leading to a focal point within the phrase. Phrasing the couplet rhythm adds a sense of the ‘lullaby’ which is the theme of the chorus [Ex.2].

Conductors N28/B22 needs careful direction. Give two quaver up beats, and then conduct a divided 4 beats in the bar

throughout. Very little rit. is required, more a placement of the final cadence.

N29/B23 should be 1 in a bar but not hurried within it. As a rule, all 3/8 markings in baroque music indicate 1 beat per bar; there are few exceptions to this.

At N33/B27a, the soprano/alto duet is always a topic of discussion as to the speed. George Guest used to say ‘the margin between a speed which feels natural and one which is struggling to convince is a very small one.’ He was so right. Here is a situation where anything too fast sounds trivial. Yet the text ‘Behold my saviour is taken’ and the music suggest unease, even fretting. The first part of this aria leads to the chorus and, as is correct practice in baroque performance, the tempi should relate. The chorus is the fastest, most dramatic music of the whole work: ‘Have lightnings and thunders forgotten their fury?’ The link between the aria and chorus should be seamless. A tempo marking of crotchet = c.56/60 should then become the dotted crotchet of the following section. This tempo allows enough space within the aria for the soloists to weave their lines. It also leads nicely into the drama of the 3/8 chorus. Note: it is easy to slow up the 3/8 section with first beats that are late in appearing.

The whole of this chorus needs slow, careful work to ensure the singers are completely familiar with their lines, particularly basses who have to sing long

phrases of fast moving semiquavers – not usually a bass speciality!

The completion of Part I, N35/B29, is a choral variation on the chorale ‘O man, thy heavy sin lament’. It presents all manner of challenges, chiefly rhythmic. As soon as it begins, Bach writes a movement that is based on constant semiquaver movement. The only relaxation from that is at cadences. Added to that is the use of the tied semiquaver to a long note. Invariably, the rhythm slackens if the instrumentalists lose the sense of forward rhythm. Bass instruments often hurry long passages of semiquavers, for instance bars 30-33.

The choir in chorale-like mode needs to be equally exact rhythmically – none of the main beats must be late. The sopranos sing the chorale melody and in order to hear the detail of the inner voices, I shorten all their ends of phrases by a crotchet.

It is the combination of these two contrasting textures that holds the key to success. Once again, Bach writes independently to each of the elements, orchestra and choir, and yet they are inextricably as one.

In Part II I will suggest layout of instrumentalists, choir and a rehearsal plan. I have often been asked how to organise the rehearsal and am happy to share with readers the plan I use on an annual basis for the Bach Choir.

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J.S. Bach: *St Matthew Passion* Part II