

Bach's St. John Passion
at Trinity Cathedral (April 3)



by Timothy Robson

Trinity Cathedral in downtown Cleveland was packed on Friday evening for its annual Good Friday concert. This year Todd Wilson, the Cathedral's director of music, presented Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passion According to St. John*. It was musically a very fine performance, using period instruments, a chamber-sized chorus (mostly, more on that below) and a group of talented soloists who were all well-versed in historically-informed performance practices. The program booklet contained a lengthy, informative essay by musicologist Judith Eckelmeyer.

Bach's *St. John Passion* was first performed in Leipzig on Good Friday, April 7, 1724, as part of a Lutheran Vespers service. The music of the Passion lasts about 90 minutes. In

Bach's time, the service also included an hour-long sermon (those German Lutherans were made of sterner stuff than most modern American congregants!)

The text is taken from the Gospel of John, chapters 18 and 19 and the story is narrated by a tenor soloist, the Evangelist (Corey Shotwell in this performance). Other named characters included Jesus (Anthony Gault, baritone), and Peter and Pilate (Jonathan Cooper, baritone). The chorus takes the role of the crowd. Interspersed within the action are arias for soprano, alto, tenor and bass soloists, who provide commentary on the scenes. Sopranos Margaret Carpenter and Madeline Healey, sopranos, countertenors John McElliott and Jay White, countertenors, tenor Shawn Mlynek, and baritone Jonathan Cooper were the aria soloists. As guideposts along the way, there were textually-related Lutheran chorales. Originally, these would have been sung by the congregation; here they were sung by the Trinity Cathedral Choir.

The soloists were all excellent, but pride of place goes to the young tenor Corey Shotwell, who sang the relentless (and relentlessly high) role of the Evangelist with dramatic involvement and seeming ease. There were a few wayward pitches, but his involvement in the text and its declamation was total. In the pivotal role of Pilate, Jonathan Cooper portrayed a government official who was corrupt, but aware that he was sending an innocent Jesus to his death. As Jesus, Anthony Gault stood away, as part of the Consort, thus distancing himself from the action happening around him.

The Cathedral Choir was divided into two parts for this performance. The main choir sang the opening and closing choruses and several of the chorales, while a sub-chorus of sixteen singers (the Trinity Consort) sang the rest, including the very tricky "crowd" choruses. Though Todd Wilson favored brisk tempos, the Trinity Consort sang with clarity of diction and rhythm and pure tone.

The orchestra was comprised of early music specialists, including some familiar faces from Apollo's Fire and the early music program at Case Western Reserve University. What a good choice to use period instruments! The sounds of the strings and winds blended well with the chorus and soloists. The obbligato instrumentalists brought gentle character to each of the arias.

Mention must be made of the continuo players: René Schiffer, cello, Simon Martyn-Ellis, archlute, and especially Nicolas Haigh, whose playing on the sweet-sounding portative organ supported the harmonic underpinnings of the whole performance. Haigh also performed Bach's chorale prelude *O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde gross*, BWV 622 ("O mankind, mourn your great sins") as a musical interlude between parts 1 and 2 of the Passion on the Cathedral's large Flentrop organ, while the offering was taken.

In their musically successful performance, Todd Wilson and his forces caught the drama of Bach's Passion. Despite acclaimed stagings of the Passions by Peter Sellars, Bach's passion settings are not operas. They are contemplative, pietistic works meant to evoke religious fervor in the listener. In Trinity's performance, the tension was ratcheted up through the death of Jesus, until the catharsis of the last chorus, *Ruht wohl, ihr heiligen Gebeine* ("Rest well") and the final chorale. The warm applause at the end was well-deserved.

As a postscript, this *St. John Passion* performance was the second early music performance to be heard at Trinity Cathedral this Holy Week. On Wednesday, April 1, sopranos Margaret Carpenter and Madeline Healey, cellist David Ellis and organist Nicolas Haigh gave an exquisite performance of François Couperin's *Leçons de ténèbres*. The music was part of the Cathedral's service of Tenebrae ("Shadows"), during which the *Lamentations* of the prophet Jeremiah were read and then performed in Couperin's settings. Candles were ritually extinguished, leaving the congregation in darkness in preparation for the grief of Good Friday. The Couperin performances, though of a much more intimate nature than the Bach Passion, were equally memorable.

Photo by Sam Hubish.

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