

Annual Highlights

There are two main events in the Christian calendar, Easter and Christmas. They bring us joy as well opportunities for reflection.

The time leading up to Easter is the period of Lent. The days between Ash Wednesday and the celebration of the resurrection of Christ are pregnant with meaning and for many of us with music. It is the time of year when performances of Johann Sebastian Bach's Passions abound. The words are taken from the Evangelists, St. Matthew, or St. John. It can be a magical period of uplifting music, live or on the radio, nourishing the soul with every note.

The first time I heard a complete performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion was while a teenager in Amsterdam. Never will I forget this, for me, poignant event. At the time I was a boarder at a Quakerschool in Holland. Mr. Hilsley, our Jewish music teacher, had gathered together maybe eight or ten pupils for this special excursion. It was a great treat to leave the precincts of the boarding school, wait for a local bus and then in Utrecht take the train to Amsterdam. The performance started at noon in the Concertgebouw. Full of excitement we took out seats, at which point Mr. Hilsley produced enough scores for everyone to be able to follow the music. What a performance it was. The Evangelist was sung by a famous German tenor by the name of Ernst Haefliger. At one point I was afraid he was going to run out of breath. There is a moment in the Passion where after Peter has denied Christ three times he goes away and cries bitterly. Bach imbues those words "weinete bitterlich" with the deepest of emotion. However, turning the page of the score and knowing how many more notes remained to be sung, in my innocence I feared for the soloist. Of course, the Evangelist was in full control of his breathing, but those two words seemed to me to take an eternity.

My most recent experience of being present at a live performance of the St. Matthew Passion was last February in St. Therese's Church in Mount Merrion, Co. Dublin. The choir was Dublin's Goethe Choir. The very large church was filled to capacity and beyond. We heard later many patrons had to stand at the back throughout. My friend and I had come early and managed to garner excellent seats with a full view of the all-important Evangelist as well as plenty of leg room. After all, the performance was scheduled to last a minimum of three hours. Every

minute that evening was precious. When we left the church, it was dark outside, but we were walking on air.

The part of the Evangelist is always sung by a tenor voice. This time it was sung in the original German and the fine tenor, one Dustin Drosdziok, afterwards thanked the audience on face book for their rapt attention and support by way of a standing ovation. This could not have happened in Germany as it is not customary to applaud in a church, especially after such a sacred work. Fortunately, this didn't apply in Dublin last month.

How do you define, a sung passion? According to the dictionary "passion" is a strongly felt emotion as well as denoting the suffering and death of Jesus! The Evangelist hardly looked at the score that evening. He related the last days of Christ's life with immense feeling. Yet he was never carried away while narrating his story. It is left to the figure of Christ, a bass voice, to declare "Eli, Eli, lama Sabathani". My God, my God, wherefore hast thou me forsaken.

A Passion by Bach could be likened to a religious opera – no costumes but many soloists as well as two choirs. The soloists comment in sweet melodic fashion on the drama unfolding around the last days of Christ's life on earth. The choirs, young boy's voices and the mature voices of the ordinary man and woman are witness to these events.

Spring will always be associated with early blooms in pastel shades on the ground and pink flowering cherry and magnolia trees shoulder high. The Lenten period falls into this opening up of nature and for me it is also associated with a sung narrative, the passion of Jesus Christ as interpreted by one of the apostles. The music and the story are a masterful combination of what was first written and performed under the baton of J.S. Bach in 1727. It seems to have lost none of its intensity and magic after almost 300 years. The audience in Dublin was encouraged to join in with some of the choruses sung by the choirs on stage.

During the 1970s a fine conductor by the name of John Beckett, and yes he is a relative of Samuel Beckett, started a series of performances of all of Bach's Cantatas. These took place on Sunday afternoons in St. Anne's Church in Dublin's Dawson Street. The series would continue for a full decade. As the audience applauded, he would take the score off the music stand, hold it up and point to the composer's name. It was his

way of indicating that Bach is the master not the conductor or musicians of the day.

Hearing divine music brings us closer to divinity.

Immense gratitude then for a season that brings us spring flowers, longer days as well as a reminder of a historical event in the Canon of the Christian Church.

Thank you J.S.Bach.