

The Passion and Glory of Windfire

J.S. Bach – St John Passion, presented by the Windfire Music Choir with the Geelong Chorale and Windfire Orchestra all conducted by Joseph Hie. St Mary's Basilica, October 8 2022

Bach's first setting of the Passion story, based on the Gospel of St John, written four hundred years ago, appeared as fresh and relevant as on its first performance on Good Friday in 1723.

The Passion recounts the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus Christ and is a foundation stone of the Christian religion. For those listening to the work in isolation, there is little hint that there is more to this story – the ultimate climax of Easter's resurrection. This performance, conducted by Joseph Hie was the opening concert in the 2022 Windfire Festival.

From the first ominous chords of the opening chorus *Herr, unser Herrscher* ('Lord, thou our Master'), there was a sense of impending doom. A bass pulse underlaid each bar, rising and falling as the purpose of the work was outlined – to tell a key narrative to those attending a service on Good Friday.

While the work was originally written as part of the liturgy, modern performances are almost always performed in concert. This allows the full drama of the work to shine. Conductor Joseph Hie had a sure control of his forces. As a chorister himself, Joseph appears to have an instinctive talent for bringing out every nuance from his choir. It is an extremely difficult task to move emotionally from a howling mob baying for the death of Jesus, to become Christians, commenting with compassion, sorrow and faith, on this horrific story of politics, power and ultimate crucifixion. The fifty-strong chorus sang the challenging work with absolute conviction.

The story is narrated by The Evangelist, sung here by Robert McFarlane. Bach's recitative setting is dramatic. McFarlane had a consummate skill, word-painting the text from the softest falsetto to declamatory fortissimo, always in control, with Rhys Boak (organ) and Edi Cardingley (cello) providing a flawless continuo.

The role of Jesus was performed by Adrian Tamburini, whose commanding presence and superb bass voice dominated the action.

Other characters who appear in first person, Pontius Pilate, Peter, a maid and a servant were performed by the soloists – including baritone Tom Healey who sang Pilate, while also joining the bass line of the chorus.

The solo arias, like the chorales sung by the chorus, comment directly on the action. Danielle O'Keefe sang the alto arias with a clarity and conviction.

It was refreshing to hear a woman singing this part in a work dominated by the male perspective. Her two arias were, for me, a highlight of this performance.

Lee Abrahamson's rich soprano and soaring line added glorious warmth to the soprano arias – demonstrating that she is equally at home singing Bach and Wagner.

Henry Choo sang the tenor arias with clarity and a lovely vocal line.

Of particular note was the first aria. This is a fine example of Bach's use of small forces for effect. Two violas and continuo accompany the tenor as he painted an analogy to explain Christ's suffering as a sign of God's grace.

Other examples of Bach's instrumental economy abound in this work.

While the instruments may have been considered as accompaniment, such compositions are really equal partnerships between players and voices.

With limited rehearsal time, the musicians must form a bond as strong as those of a

string quartet (who may have had the luxury of many hours working together). In this regard, Joseph Hie's leadership was vital.

In this Windfire performance, technique became incidental as the tragedy unfolded over two spellbinding hours of timeless Bach music.

The story this passion recounted is as fresh and relevant in our strife-riven times as it was two thousand years ago.

One was left to wonder whether humanity has moved forward at all over the millennia.

What is certain was that this performance was amazing. A triumph to all concerned.

The Windfire Festival continues over the next week. Information and tickets are available from musicatthebasilica.org.au

– *Helen Lyth.*