



“The Greatest of All the Holiday Gatherings”: How the St. Matthew Passion came to Australia

An academic symposium on the first Australian performances of J. S. Bach’s St Matthew Passion, initiated by the Australian Bach Society Inc., was an event long wished for by the musicologists Drs Janice Stockigt and Samantha Owens.

On 15 September 2012, several leading early music scholars gave a fascinating insight into the first Australian performances of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion. Held at The University of Melbourne, the Symposium “Bach in Australia” was opened by the Rev. Dr Andreas Loewe, Chaplain of Trinity College and Gavan Lecturer in Theology. Noting that the St. Matthew Passion was virtually unknown here in 1870, he asked an audience of some 50 people “What happened between 1870 and 1875 to lead to a Melbourne performance being labelled ‘the greatest of all the holiday gatherings’ in 1875 (The Argus)?” According to Dr Janice Stockigt from The University of Melbourne, Mendelssohn’s resurrection of Bach, together with reports published in *The Musical Times*, had sparked British interest, which in turn influenced Australia. “The concert illustrates the rapidity with which Melbourne society emulated what was seen to be in vogue in England,” added Stockigt.

The first complete performance of the St. Matthew Passion in the Southern Hemisphere took place at the Melbourne Town Hall in 1875. The hall was crammed and hundreds were turned away from the concert by the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society. Conducted by Joseph Summers, it was described in The Argus as “not in that condition of preparedness in which it should have been when such a grand audience was met together to be present at the first performance of it.” Nevertheless, it was considered very successful for a first attempt, with Henry Keiley writing that it “should be rehearsed systematically for another twelve months.”

Dr Julia Szuster from The University of Adelaide painted a vivid picture of the first Adelaide performance, which was conducted by Dr E. Harold Davies on 28 May 1903 at the Town Hall. “There was no established orchestra in Adelaide at the time, but Davies was able to put together a scratch band of good string players,” said Dr Szuster. Tickets to the event were highly sought after. Four extra rows of seats were added to the Adelaide Town Hall’s existing capacity of a thousand but people were still turned away at the door. The strong attendance enabled the Adelaide Bach Society to donate 46 pounds to 13 special charities after the event.

In Brisbane, as reported by Dr Samantha Owens from The University of Queensland, parts of the St. Matthew Passion were performed as early as 1874 under the baton of R.T. Jefferies. However, the next Brisbane performance was not for nearly 50 years, partially due to the prevailing anti-German sentiment during the First World War. In the 1920s, the conductor Robert Dalley-Scarlett helped revive interest in Bach. He held the first Bach Festival in the Southern Hemisphere in 1930 and founded the Brisbane Bach Society in 1931. According to Dr Owens, another gap in the transmission of Bach’s work during the Second World War “was not due to prejudice or forced banning but rather a lack of male vocalists during wartime, as well as a desire to explore other repertoire.”

The instrumentation of the early performances is fascinating. In Melbourne, Joseph Summers added massed brass and percussion instruments to the score, with the ensemble singing and playing with an organ tuned to old philharmonic pitch (a’ equalling approximately 460 Hz). The audience was expected to rise to sing the chorales, but since

neither words nor music was provided, an embarrassed non-participation ensued. Dr Davies' ensemble in Adelaide included two string orchestras and an organ but no wind players, with the entire work transposed down a semitone. The 1874 performance in Brisbane featured a double quartet of strings, while in 1921, the singers were accompanied by organ and piano – each instrument representing one of the two orchestras.

In an insightful response to the Symposium, Professor Stephanie Trigg from the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions focused on how Australian settlers perceived this “extraordinary music about death and passion”, stating: “We like to think of Bach as canonical, timeless or ahistorical. However, it is important to remember that reactions do vary, even within the same time zone.” This sentiment was echoed by Professor Kerry Murphy, Head of Musicology at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, in her concluding remarks: “Today’s Symposium once again illustrates that while it is easy to view geographical and cultural isolation as a problem; in fact it can be a great advantage since it could lead to startlingly fresh understandings of mainstream European repertoire, with audience’s gaps in knowledge enabling them to receive works relatively free from preconceptions.”

After the Symposium, the guests were treated to a performance of J. S. Bach’s Cantata *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele* (BWV 180) at Trinity College Chapel. Professor Graham Lieschke gave a lively introduction to the recital, which featured the Early Voices and the Baroque Ensemble of the Early Music Studio, Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, under the baton of Greg Dikmans. The results of the Symposium will be presented at next year’s Bach Network UK meeting in Warsaw. Thank you to all those involved for a fascinating and memorable afternoon!

Adele Schonhardt, October 2012

The Australian Bach Society was founded in November 2011 as an initiative of the German Church East Melbourne. It aims to foster a local appreciation of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries by arranging performances, lectures and other activities.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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