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# Seraphic Fire's 'St. Matthew Passion' simply glorious

February 26, 2018 By Palm Beach Arts Paper — 0 Comments



**Johann Sebastian Bach, painted in 1746 by Elias Gottlob Haussmann.  
(Wikimedia Commons)**

### **By Robert Croan**

You don't have to be a believer to be moved – overcome with emotion, even – by J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion. Although Bach composed this work for a Lutheran Good Friday service in 1727, repeating it with revisions in subsequent years, it has survived as a concert work.

Patrick Dupré Quigley, director of Seraphic Fire's splendid South Florida performances of the St. Matthew earlier this month, stated outright that his performances were "definitively secular in nature: held in a non-Lutheran venue within a concert setting ... with a 21st century audience that has a much different concept of what is both dramatically and socially acceptable."

There's precedent for this. This work was forgotten after Bach's death, until 1829, when composer Felix Mendelssohn discovered it and revived it in shortened concert form in Berlin. Part of the reason for Mendelssohn's cuts were pure length; in its full form, the work lasts more than three hours, not counting intermissions. But the libretto by an 18th-century poet known as Picander, as well as some passages in the gospel itself, was patently anti-Semitic – acceptable to Bach's congregations but not to Mendelssohn, who was born Jewish although baptized Lutheran at an early age.

In Seraphic's presentation, seen Feb. 17 in Fort Lauderdale's All Saints Episcopal Church, Quigley followed Mendelssohn's choices of cuts and inclusions, but opted for Bach's original orchestration (though with modern instruments). The 20-voice choir (nine of whom were students from the UCLA Ensemble Artist Program), accompanied by 20 instrumentalists, approximated the proportions of Bach's time. Even with about an hour of music trimmed out, it was a lengthy evening. Seraphic Fire's advance publicity had announced 90 minutes with no intermission, but the actual event lasted 2 hours and 20 minutes, with a 15-minute interval between Parts 1 and 2.

But what glorious hours those were! When all the forces combined in a single movement – notably the grandiose opening and closing choruses – the effect was quite overwhelming. Quigley has a capacity to make his modest forces pack the wallop of a much larger assemblage. Seraphic Fire's choristers are expert performers who can blend into the ensemble to generate a singular sound, or when required, perform the most difficult solos with consummate skill. They respond to this conductor's every move and gesture with razor-sharp precision.

There's nothing like Bach's St. Matthew in all of Western music. Only, perhaps, Mozart's Don Giovanni and Wagner's The Ring of the Nibelung can claim comparable scope and universality. Passion plays derived from the four Gospels, had existed since the Middle Ages, but Bach's had a format all their own. The biblical words were sung by a tenor Evangelist, accompanied by basso continuo (usually a keyboard and low string instrument). The words of Jesus, however, were given to a baritone, backed by a musical halo of strings. The choir portrayed the crowd, with individual members singing the words of incidental characters in the story.

An important innovation was the addition of individual commentary, in the form of solo arias and hymn tune (chorale) settings. The arias are operatic virtuoso pieces, usually with one or two obbligato instruments. The chorales range from elaborate fantasias for double chorus to unadorned four-part settings that Bach harmonized with endless variety and creativity. Bach's congregations would have known these tunes and joined in. The so-called Passion Chorale, known in English as "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," harmonized several ways by Bach in the present work, is a staple of Protestant church services.

First vocal honors go to tenor Stephen Soph, a seven-year Seraphic Fire veteran, who intoned the long, intricate and gruelingly difficult lines of the Evangelist with precision of pitch and rhythm, while adjusting his vocal color to the dramatic needs of the German text. He didn't just sing; he told a story. Guest bass Kenneth Kellogg, rendered Jesus' lines with vibrant tone, enhanced by the string accompaniment.

Patrick Muehleise, another tenor and longtime Seraphic member, gave a virtuoso performance of the tenor aria, "Ich will bei meinem Jesu wachen" – actually a duet with the equally virtuosic oboe soloist, Kevin Pearl. A spectacular example of communal virtuosity was the exquisite duet, "So ist mein Jesu nun gefangen," in which soprano Nola Richardson and alto Amanda Crider joined forces with Pearl and flutist Sarah Frisof in contravention with the choral shouts representing the crowd.

The evening's emotional center, however, was the magnificent alto aria with violin obbligato by Matt Albert, "Erbarme dich," vocalized by Clara Osowski with high expressivity but a lighter-than-ideal timbre for this over-the-top monumental lament. Steven Eddy's bass sound was admirably agile in "Gebt mir meinem Jesu wieder" – the only lively aria in St. Matthew – though bass Charles W. Evans was pallid in the sublime exhortation for inner peace, "Mache dich, mein Herze rein."

**Update Feb. 27:** This story has been updated to correct an attribution error and add names of instrumental soloists.

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