

Datestamp: 05/17/2010

# St. Matthew Passion an unforgettable feat

## CONCERT REVIEW

By Janelle Gelfand

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It was a feat of musicianship and endurance, and the inspired music making will not be soon forgotten by anyone who heard it.

On Saturday, James Conlon and the Cincinnati May Festival revisited J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion for the first time in 25 years at the festival. For the ambitious undertaking, the May Festival Chorus, prepared by Robert Porco, was divided into two choirs, which stood side-by-side on Music Hall's stage. The Cincinnati Boychoir, directed by Christopher Eanes, was in the balcony for their pure-toned contributions to choruses in Part I. And a reduced Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra was also divided, with its members facing each other. Two portative organs (Heather MacPhail and Michael Chertock) and a viola da gamba (James Lambert) added notes of authenticity.

The St. Matthew Passion outlines the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, including the Last Supper, Jesus' betrayal and burial. The story, as Conlon explained Saturday, is told three ways: through narration drawn from scripture (sung by the Evangelist), in contemplations sung by soloists in arias, and in chorales, which were likely sung by the congregation at Bach's St. Thomas Church in Leipzig.

It was a somber, reverent journey and the work's "heavenly length" of more than three hours (not including intermission) was not for everyone. The lights were turned down to allow for projections of religious-themed artwork, in collaboration with the Cincinnati Art Museum. (Those who sat in the gallery did not have a clear view, as the screen was obstructed by the English surtitles. I did not like some of the choices of art, and the fact that they repeated over and over.) The May Festival Chorus sang the German text with excellent diction, and added bite in dramatic moments. The chorus was radiant in the great chorales, singing with not only precise ensemble, but with an inner darkness that fit the mood of this work. The opening scene was solemn and rapt, and the beauty and expression of the double choirs remained consistent, all the way to the final "In tears of grief."

Tenor John Aler, who sang the role of the Evangelist at the festival 25 years ago, sounded fresh and richly communicative, and never wavered through the role's immense challenges. The evening's most expressive soloist was bass-baritone William McGraw, who, as Jesus, projected warmth, humanity and a serene quality that was unforgettable.

The four soloists included James Creswell, whose firm, commanding bass was an asset in Peter's denial, and tenor Paul Appleby, whose fine aria, "Rejoice! Rejoice!" was enhanced by Lambert's viola da gamba.

Mezzo-soprano Erica Brookhyser shone for her arresting vocal timbre and expressive warmth. Soprano Rebekah Camm was fluid, although she failed to convince in these somber texts, notably in the weeping phrases of her Part I duet with Brookhyser.

On the podium, Conlon led a dedicated reading that was attentive to detail, and with tempos that flowed serenely. Bach's music, with its many moments of text painting, is a revelation. The orchestra, using little vibrato and playing with lightness, provided some of the evening's most rapturous moments.

They included exquisite playing by concertmaster Timothy Lees in the alto aria, "Erbarne Dich, mein Gott" (Have mercy, Lord, on me), crackling tone painting from bassist Owen Lee and violinist Eric Bates, and many fine contributions from wind soloists.

The May Festival concludes next weekend in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-381-3300, [www.mayfestival.com](http://www.mayfestival.com).

The May Festival continues Friday and Saturday with concerts at 8 p.m. in Music Hall. Tickets: \$18 to \$100.

Online video Watch the chorus and orchestra in action at [Cincinnati.Com](http://Cincinnati.Com). Search: videos

**Caption:**

**Publication:** The Cincinnati Enquirer

**Section:** Metro

**Source:**

**Edition:** Late

**Page:** 4

**Book:** B

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**From:**