

St. Matthew Passion

THE *St. Matthew Passion*, one of the world's masterpieces of dramatic oratorio, will be performed in Wellington on Wednesday, October 3. The work was written by Bach for a service to be held in the Lutheran Church in Leipzig on Good Friday in 1728. After this performance the *Passion* remained unperformed for over a hundred years, and it was not until 1829 that Mendelssohn brought it to life again.

The *Passion* as a musical form has a long history in Germany, the German people becoming especially fond of it. Like the oratorio, it is the outgrowth of the medieval mystery play which had its origin in the desire to illustrate the gospel stories, whose Latin text was unintelligible to the majority of the

congregations. The Reformed Church of Germany inherited from Rome the tradition of presenting the story of the *Passion* with dramatic devices to bring it home to the mind of the worshippers. The gospel story was broken up into separate episodes and the actual words spoken by the individuals were given to separate characters.

From the time of Bach's predecessor Schutz, himself a writer of numerous *Passions*, there was hardly an organist in Germany who did not try his hand at a *Passion*. In Bach's century, C. P. E. Bach and Haydn wrote in this form, and in the 19th century there was Beethoven's *Mount of Olives*, as well as a *Passion* by Spohr and Perosi. Modern *Passions* include those by Stainer (*The*



Spencer Digby photograph (*Crucifixion*) and Somervell (*The Passion of Christ*).



HARRY BRUSEY, conductor of the Phoenix Choir, and the two English soloists, Keith Faulkner (top right) and William Herbert



DR. THORNTON LOFTHOUSE, who will play the Goff harpsichord in its first public appearance

Bach set the *Passion* story five times, but today he is remembered by the *St. Matthew* and the *St. John*. His text comes from the gospel of *St. Matthew*, chapters 26-27. He uses every instrument and device that is consistent with the spirit of the *Passion*. The work contains recitatives, arias, chorales, and orchestral descriptive scenes. It begins with a double chorus, "Come Ye Daughters, Share My Mourning," which shows, as it were, a view of calvary from the city of Jerusalem. Gradually the eye moves upwards with the basses and Calvary itself is seen. Anxious questions are exchanged by the two choirs and a new section of sopranos is heard singing, "O Lamb of God Unspotted," the hymn that is also Jesus's funeral dirge. The stage is now set and the story begins.

Throughout the work there are many arias which have become justly famed. There is, for instance, the soprano aria with flute, "For Love My Saviour Now is Dying," the alto aria, "Have Mercy, Lord," with violin obbligato, and the tenor aria, "I Would Beside My Lord," with oboe accompaniment. Bach's gift for writing orchestral description is illustrated in the scene after the scourging of Jesus. The audience hears the contralto soloist singing "All Gracious God," but throughout this recitative and the aria that follows, the rhythm in the strings reminds the listener all the time that the scourge is falling remorselessly on Jesus's back.

The work ends with the Evangelist telling of the sealing of the tomb, a brief farewell by the four soloists and the final stately elegy by the chorus. Thus the work ends as it began, with a great double chorus. By contrast with the *St. John Passion*, this is a very personal oratorio, and it gives Bach every opportunity for meditation and comment.

At the performance in Wellington several notable overseas soloists will be taking part. William Herbert, one of England's foremost oratorio singers, will take the part of the Evangelist. He is well known for his performance of this part in England, and especially in Holland. Just before he left England for his

present tour he sang in Handel's *Judas Maccabeus* in Holland—a performance to celebrate the Dutch liberation. Keith Faulkner, an Englishman with an international reputation, will sing the bass-baritone roles. He, too, has frequently sung in the *St. Matthew Passion* in England and Europe. His present visit is as an examiner for the Royal Schools of Music. Donald Munro will sing the baritone roles, and the women's roles will be sung by Dora Drake, soprano, and Muriel Gale, contralto. The continuo part will be played by Dr. Thornton Lofthouse, using the new Goff harpsichord in its first public appearance. Dr. Lofthouse has played this continuo part hundreds of times in London, but, as he puts it, "each time slightly differently." The choir will be the Phoenix, making its first public appearance. When the Schola Cantorum was disbanded early this year, the Phoenix Choir arose from its ashes. With Harry Brusey as chorus-master it was formed primarily to perform large-scale works—there will be two appearances this year with the National Orchestra. The National Orchestra on this occasion will be conducted by James Robertson. The performance will be broadcast from all YCs on Wednesday, October 3, at 8.0 p.m.

(continued from previous page)

sire to communicate these rhythms to other human beings gave rise to theatrical performance."

Actors, in fact, take great liberties with the libretti and there are no texts which are considered to be the correct ones—each opera has a considerable diversity of texts and only the rough outline of the story is important. Various innovations have been introduced from time to time, and there is no feeling that in altering anything in the way of production something valuable is lost. This is essentially a live theatre, and no Chinese thinks of it as some relic of bygone days, therefore, innovation is natural and desirable where it increases the dramatic effect. The orchestra used to sit on the stage in full view of the audience, because there was no other place for it in the old theatre, and because of the close co-ordination between actors and musicians. It is now thought better to hide it in the wings where the players can see the actors but do not interfere with the action or

become confused with the actors. The lighting is simple, the stage hands in the full glare of the footlights and flood lighting, but this, too, is now being slightly modified, and the stage is blacked out for a change of scenery. Simple stage sets are also being introduced; few cardboard clouds on the floor of the stage indicate that the scene is celestial, a few outlines of hills that it is mountainous, and so on.

So far the content of the old dramas seems to fit the new idealism admirably, but there are slight changes here, too, a slight emphasis on this, a slight playing down of that, the introduction of a moral tone here and the cutting out of an unworthy thought there. But this is legitimate in drama that for a thousand years has undergone small changes while it remained essentially the same, a subtle art form popular and witty, a marvellous spectacle and first-rate entertainment.

(A talk on the visit of the Peking Opera Company, by James Bertram, will be heard from 3YC on October 4.)