

The St. Matthew PASSION MUSIC

Explained

by

Robert Parker, C.M.G.

Next Sunday evening, Passion Sunday, music-lovers will be afforded the opportunity of

hearing a selection from the St. Matthew Passion music, broadcast by 2YA on relay from St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral. Mr. Robert Parker, C.M.G., will be the organist and choirmaster; Miss Ava Symons and Mrs. Furner Steers will play the violin and piano parts respectively, and the soloists will be Mrs. Alexander, Mrs. Wilfred Andrews, Mr. Chas. Williams and Mr. Binet Brown.

FROM early days in the history of the Roman Church it had been customary to recite, on Palm Sunday and Good Friday, the story of the sufferings and death of Christ as recorded in the Gospel narratives.

The recitation was chanted on the plainsong melodies that are known as Gregorian tones, and a certain amount of characterisation was effected by allotting the words of the Evangelist, and those of Christ, with the subordinate characters of Judas, Peter, etc., to different voices; the utterances of the multitude being sung by a choir. In the Reformed Church the practice was continued, and expanded by Martin Luther by the addition of choruses in four-part harmony, the work being printed with the German text in 1573.

During the next 150 years, as the art of music gradually developed, various settings of the Passion story were composed by Schutz, Keiser and other prominent musicians of the period, including one by Handel in 1717; but the culminating achievement for all time was made by John Sebastian Bach in his settings of the Biblical narrative contained in the gospels of St. John and St. Matthew. The latter is by far the more important of the two works; indeed the composer has, in the St. Matthew Passion, reached the highest point in purely religious music that can possibly be conceived.

It was composed in the early period of Bach's long residence in Leipzig, and it was first performed there, in the Church of St. Thomas, on Good Friday, 1729. After this initial performance the work seems to have been laid aside and completely forgotten until exactly 100 years later, when it was revived and publicly performed in Berlin under the direction of the youthful Mendelssohn, with remarkable success, in 1829. Its fame, owing to this auspicious revival, soon spread throughout Germany, but it was not till 1854 that it reached England, where for many years it received but scant recognition and, at long intervals, but few performances.

During the last 20 or 30 years the appreciation of Bach, as the most outstanding force of music, has grown with extraordinary rapidity, and as a result, the St. Matthew Passion is now heard in countless churches and cathedrals, especially during Lenten season. To name only one notable example, the annual performance in St. Paul's Cathedral is attended by an enormous congregation of devout listeners, many hundreds of these having waited for hours to gain admittance, and many more being unable to find even standing room in London's great

Mother Church.

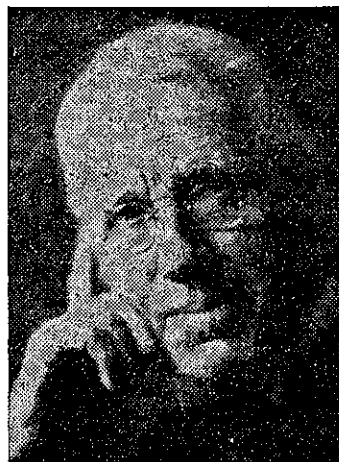
To understand it fully, one must know something of the church in which it had its birth—the church of Luther's simple Protestantism, of innocent, child-like faith, of devout sincerity. To Bach himself, as to the worshippers in the Thomaskirche two centuries ago, the Passion of our Saviour was a real thing which touched their own lives intimately. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was to them so truly the Son of Man, that they could speak of Him, and speak to Him, with all the simple confidence of a little child.

THE quiet, tender chorus at the end of the work, in which the voices sing "Mein Jesu, gute Nacht" (My Jesus, fare thee well—literally "Good-Night") has all the heartfelt loving sorrow of a human leave-taking. It is an attitude of worship which the world can never see again, but Bach's music, enduring in its splendid beauty like some great cathedral, can show us more truly than anything else, what it was.

The form for such church music which has come down to Bach from earlier hands, had grown into a strange hybrid of many styles—secular as well as sacred—a medley of operatic and ecclesiastical tradition. Bach had perforce to cast his ideas in the mould which his age accepted; he did it with such splendid effect that the form seems exactly right, simple, like his own devout spirit, and noble in a way which no one has ever since achieved.

The story is set before us in a series of dramatic episodes, almost pictorial in their vivid directness. At salient points, the narrative is interrupted, and a meditation on the scene which has just been recounted is set before us, sometimes in an aria by one solo voice, sometimes by a simple chorale or by a chorus. The choirs—there are three choirs, two of the usual voices, men's and women's together, and one of boys' voices—are used in a twofold way, to express these contemplations of the worshippers' spirit, and to take part in the actual unfolding of the drama. In this latter way the voices are used with telling, often almost overwhelming, effect.

THERE are in all some 24 scenes, of which roughly one-half are rounded off by arias and half by choruses. The actual telling of the story is in the hands of a narrator—called the Evangelist—a tenor soloist, in a series of recitatives with orchestral and organ accompaniment. The utterances of our Lord Himself, though also recitatives, are more nearly in arioso form, with a more flowing, melodious line, and are meant to be (Concluded on page 31.)



Mr. Robert Parker, C.M.G.