

# Review: St Matthew Passion, by Birmingham Bach Choir

For many years Birmingham Bach Choir's Good Friday performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion has been a major highlight of the Symphony Hall season.

There was a tinge of sadness this time round, as next year the baton for this presentation passes on to another of our well-loved organisations. But all the emotion was poured into this perennially harrowing story of man's inhumanity to man at Christ's crucifixion.

Bach structures his vast score brilliantly, moving from expansive reflection to tight drama, and eventually relaxing the tension into a sunset of sorrow.

His pacing has a dramatic flow which was perfectly found by conductor Paul Spicer, culminating in a well-judged pause at the pivotal moment of the death of Jesus.

And this was followed by a poignant account of the famous Passion Chorale where Spicer dispensed with any instrumental support. Elsewhere the contribution of the supple English Chamber Orchestra was magnificent, the many instrumental solos headed by the deft violins of Stephanie Gonley and Pauline Lowbury.

Spicer also had the resourceful idea of including the youthful ripieno chorus in all the chorales, instead of just the beginning and end of Part I. The main choir was superbly balanced and projected, and provided effective solo cameos.

The main solo team was efficient and communicative, Christopher Gillett as the gripping Evangelist and bass Christopher Purves, fresh from his sympathetic Ford in WNO's Falstaff, particularly outstanding.

Applause at the end of a work such as this is still a controversial subject. I am all for it, as it allows the audience to acknowledge the contribution the performers have made to render this a sacramental occasion. But Friday's uncouth whistling approbation is something entirely different.

**Christopher Morley**  
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