

# Even when cut, St. Matthew Passion shines

By Avigdor Zaromp  
special writer

Among the landmarks in this season's Bach celebrations was the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's performance of the St. Matthew Passion. There is an abundance of talent devoted to this master's work these days, which is encouraging. Missing was the audience. There was more than the usual number of empty seats.

Bach's religiously based music tends to be victimized by extremes. Many religiously devout have little interest in music and many of the rest are alienated by text. Overlooked by most is the awe inspiring, unparalleled art and profound stature embodied in this music. This work, over three hours in its



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uncut version, was reduced to only two hours by Maestro Gunther Herbig. He told me several weeks ago that such cuts were dictated by practical considerations. One was the risk of alienating the audience if the complete version were presented.

"In Europe, any conductor attempting to cut this work would have been crucified, but here we have quite a different attitude," he said.

Among the many parts cut was the aria "Aus Liebe" for soprano and flute obbligato. Both preceding and subsequent evangelical recitatives feature the text "Las ihn Kreuzigen" ("Let's crucify him").

Another casualty was the masterful aria for bass and viola da gamba, "Komm susses Kreuz" ("Come, thou sweet cross"). The portions omitted could have provided suffi-

cient material for a separate program.

The remaining two-thirds received one of the best live performances that I have heard. Every element functioned not only smoothly and effectively, but with stylistic integrity and authenticity that only a most knowledgeable leadership could accomplish.

Mezzo-soprano Marietta Simpson, a substitute for the scheduled Jara van Ness, proved to be extremely capable. A moving rendition of the heart-wrenching aria, "Erbarme dich," was among her several splendid songs.

Jon Humphrey, as the Evangelist, was so enmeshed in his part that he choked, when relating the betrayal of Jesus, but had steadiness and clarity everywhere else.

Leslie Guin as Jesus was a source of strength and confidence in his authoritative singing. Soprano Edit Wiens and bass Jan Opalach were impressive in their minor evangelical roles and arias.

Another major source of great satisfaction was the double choir, a combination of the Detroit Symphony Chorus and the Boys' Choir, Christ Church of Grosse Pointe. There was precision, delicate balance and overall unity present even in the most challenging mighty fugues. Nothing could convey a sense of thunder and lightning more convincingly than the well-focused singing of "Sind Blitze, Sind Donner."

Overall, there was an intense sense of drama without any to 19th

century gimmicks. The small but effective orchestra maintained a baroque character throughout. The obbligato instruments in the various arias performed with distinction, shining whenever necessary and giving way to the vocal soloists when appropriate.

The attempt to cater to the audience by cutting the music is understandable, but this didn't solve the problem of poor attendance. Given the choice, catering to artistic and musical integrity is the better way.

Without a dedicated champion for this music, it may be a long time before we are privileged to hear the St. Matthew Passion again. But when the time comes, it should be presented in its entirety. If one is destined to lose, one might as well do it in style.

# Young violinist shows extraordinary talent

By Avigdor Zaromp  
special writer

Many young musicians experience a meteoric rise to fame and recognition. Typically, these are prodigies whose artistic grasp and technique are far beyond their age. Only a select few remain to adorn our artistic firmament on a permanent basis.

Joshua Bell, a highly gifted young violinist, presented a recital together with pianist Jonathan Feldman at

Temple Israel last week.

This chamber series, like others of its kind, offers programs by some accomplished artists. The limited publicity frequently results in low attendance. This is a loss for many who fail to seize these opportunities to hear top music by top artists at very reasonable prices.

Bell, 20, performed Mendelssohn's concerto with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra last season. Here he pre-

sented two sonatas for violin and piano, as well as shorter works.

A hint of his accomplished technique came in the Chaconne by Vitalie, featuring variations on a simple theme with increasing levels of difficulty.

The major items, Beethoven's famed "Kreutzer" Sonata and the lesser known Sonata in A minor by Schumann, gave us a chance to savor the art of pianist Jonathan Feldman

as well. Feldman, who studied in Juillard under some of the best teachers, is one of the unsung talented musicians whose name is unjustly eclipsed by the principal artist.

Bell's performance of the "Kreutzer" did justice to this monumental masterpiece. The distinct character of the variations in the second movement was artistically articulate. The rousing final movement had a sense of agility that didn't contradict Beethoven's sub-

stantial scope and implied his substantial texture without encumbering it with excess weight.

Schumann's rarely performed sonata radiated with expressive, singing romanticism. Tchaikovsky's "Melodie," a popular short piece, appeared with substance beyond its exterior schmaltz. Ravel's "Cygane" combined impressionistic breathing texture with profound, expressive content.

For an encore, Bell and Feldman presented a miniature march by Kreister, which is seldom played. This provided yet another glimpse into the world of this 20th century virtuoso, whose nostalgic pieces keep bringing to life those past periods that would be otherwise lost forever.

Violinist Joshua Bell certainly deserves to be among those chosen few who survive in the tough arena of classical music.

Next program in this series will feature pianist Vladimir Feltsman on Tuesday, April 18.

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