

Desert Friends Of Music

Season Finale— Ruben Valenzuela

MONDAY, APRIL 18, 7 PM Tickets \$20

J.S. Bach: St. John Passion (The greatest Baroque Opera?)

Today, it is hard to imagine either of Bach's two surviving Passions (St. Matthew and St. John) as ever being mistaken for an opera. For many people, believers and non-believers alike, attending a Passion performance is a vital and meaningful part of Holy Week. This is not unlike the droves of people that seek out performances of Handel's Messiah in December as they make their Christmas preparation.

Indeed, Bach composed his Passions to be performed in church on Good Friday, one of the most important days in the liturgical calendar. In composing Passions of this type, Bach was stepping into a centuries old tradition of dramatized musical settings of the Gospel texts relating the events leading to Christ's crucifixion. A clear thread of evolution can be traced from the first chanted Passions of the Middle Ages, to the elaborate compositions by Bach and others that display a trend towards the theatrical and dramatic. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the Lutheran Church could count on delineated religious groups, such as the Pietists, who sought for a puritanical view of the arts, and music in particular.

Nevertheless, Bach's St. John Passion is a strikingly dramatic work with the presence of “operatic” recitatives mixed with arias and choruses to words adapted from the poet Barthold Heinrich Brockes who had also furnished passion texts for the openly operatic Passions by such composers as Keiser, Telemann and Handel.

Bach's achievement was to compose a work with a detailed and highly structured musical architecture which tells the well-known story in four parallel and mutually supportive strands. At the very core is the narrative, the Gospel text itself, sung in recitative style by the Evangelist (tenor), with Christ's words sung by a bass. Additionally, the roles of other characters (Peter and Pilate, for instance) are also taken by solo voices, while the exclamations of the crowd (turba) are voiced collectively by the chorus.

As a complement to this narrative element, there are episodes provided by the eight arias, in which action stops and an emotion or reaction is explored. These are where the most reflective moments in the Passion are found, enhanced by the accompanying solo instruments, including two violas d'amore in the bass arioso “Betrachte, meine seele” and a viola da gamba (associated in Bach's time with death) in the alto aria “Es ist vollbracht!”

The third strand, and not least important, is the communal element represented by the chorales (Lutheran hymns). These

would have been extremely familiar to Bach's congregation and would certainly have provided listeners with moments of immediate recognition and identification.

Lastly, there are the choruses that frame the work. The first chorus (opening movement) is a depiction of Christ's agony, but one which reminds us that it also leads to a path of ultimate victory (Christus Victor). The second major chorus (penultimate movement) Ruht wohl, is a gentle and consoling farewell to Christ's earthly incarnation.

Historically, the St. John Passion was once seen as the lesser-known, and in the shadow of the St. Matthew Passion.

The ability of the St. John Passion to exist on its own merit is a testament to a realization, among both performers and listeners, that this is a work with its own character and outlook. In direct contrast to the St. Matthew Passion, which speaks in a manner of meditation, the St. John Passion offers a visceral depiction of the emotionally charged events of Christ's Passion. Thus, if you were to ask me about my favorite Baroque opera is; I'd say without a doubt Bach's St. John Passion.

Concerning the Performance: The Bach Collegium San Diego's performance will feature a chamber orchestra made up of period instruments (either original or copies) which gives the listener an insight into the sound world and aesthetic of the eighteenth century. In addition, there will 4 soloists, 3 ripieno singers, and the tenor Evangelist to make up a singers roster of 9 singers! You may be asking yourself the obvious question? How can a dramatic oratorio or passion be performed with such few musicians (even when combining instrumentalists and singers)? Doesn't this undermine the dramatic potential of such a piece of music?

The inherent drama, in both music and text, will be immediate and multi-dimensional in a way that a larger chorus cannot offer. The anonymity of a chorus, by its very nature, cannot reach the same level of intention and delivery offered by a soloist. In essence, the Bach Collegium San Diego is performing the St John Passion with 9 singers/soloists with an intent of driving home the rhetorical impact of this music and text. Like on any “all-star team”, our 9 all-star soloists have been carefully chosen to represent their individual roles (Evangelist, Christ, Pilate, Peter, the Crowd, etc.). Hopefully, what you will hear will be an account of Christ's Passion that goes directly into the soul of the careful listener.

