

Historically Informed Performance

It is now clear from research – although it has taken many years for this view to become widely accepted – that the St Matthew Passion was written for just one voice to a part. Four singers formed choir 1, and they sang the arias and all the choruses assigned to their choir. The tenor from choir 1 also sang the words of the Evangelist, and the bass sang the words of Christ. Similarly, there were four singers in choir 2, who had a small share of glory with one or two solo arias each, and they also sang all the choruses assigned to choir 2. Three extra singers were used for the smaller named roles, but these three were specifically excluded from all other movements. There were also one or two extra sopranos to sing the chorale melodies in the opening chorus and in the chorus *'O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß'*. The eight choir 1 and choir 2 singers joined together to sing the chorales and the joint choruses. Similarly, Bach's orchestra, although a 'double' orchestra, was relatively small, with for example just two first violins and two seconds in each. Clearly, in tonight's performance, although our orchestra is very similar to the one Bach would have used, and plays on eighteenth century instruments (or modern copies), our vocal forces are very different. Are we justified in taking this approach?

The answer has to be yes. We will never be able to replicate exactly the conditions of performance in Bach's time. There are some things we cannot know for certain, such as the

exact standards of vocal production that would have been used. There are other conditions that we are unwilling to accept, such as the fact that Bach used almost exclusively boy singers for his soprano and alto lines (the consequence being that women would never be able to sing Bach's music), or the use of castrati singers (a step too far for most men, I would suggest, however strong their love for Baroque music). It can only be a positive thing that musicological research is able to cast increasing light on the performance practices of the eighteenth century. The wonderful sounds of 'authentic' instruments such as the Baroque oboes are really too good to miss, and to hear this music sung with Bach-sized forces is revelatory. But it is worth bearing in mind that for a Baroque musician, the exact instruments to be used for a particular piece, or the exact number of singers required were matters of relatively little importance. It was essentially an age of great pragmatism; if a piece called for soprano and oboe, but neither was available, then it was rewritten for alto and flute, with barely a second thought. If a move to a new performing space meant that more singers were required for a chorus, then they were added without question. So I think we can without apology adapt the numbers of performers we use, safe in the knowledge that we are in fact adhering to a very pragmatic – and therefore authentically Baroque – way of doing things.