

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2002

MUSIC REVIEW

Bach Passion Scaled Small, With Emotions Writ Large

By PAUL GRIFFITHS

The New York Collegium clearly made the right decision in appointing Andrew Parrott its music director: Friday's performance of Bach's "St. John Passion" at the Church of St. Vincent Ferrer on Lexington Avenue was consistently fluent, finely beautiful and movingly expressive.

Mr. Parrott has made his reputation as a musician-scholar, and here the Collegium was benefiting from both sides of him. He chose to perform Bach's revised score of 1749; more predictably for him, he chose to do so with a choir of just eight singers - the four soloists joined by four colleagues in the choral movements - and an instrumental ensemble of 18. This was where the musician in Mr. Parrott took over, for with these small forces he was able to present the monumental work as chamber music, which seemed no diminishment at all, but an elevation.

For one thing, textures and harmonies were so much clearer. The effect was plain from the opening chorus, where the poignant stress of dissonances in the flutes and oboes came right into prominence. The intensity of Bach's harmony was fully pronounced at later points of extremity, not least the depiction of Peter's shame and some of the choruses in the trial scene.

There were also musical-dramatic benefits in having the work sung by so small a group. Instead of swinging between massive choruses and solo moments, offering a pageant of the past, the entire work was individualized and brought forward: here were eight people, with voices one came to recognize, telling each other and their audience the story. The singers we were hearing as Jesus and the Evangelist were there again in the bloodthirsty Jerusalem crowd, and there, too, in the imaginary choir of 18th-century Leipzigers invoked by the chorales. The material was coming from the first century and from the Baroque, but the music was happening now.



Parrott conducts tenor Mark Bleeke and bass Curtis Streetman, who perform triple duty in the St. John Passion, tackling the arias, choruses, and recitativo parts (Bleeke: Evangelist, Streetman: Christus)

Among the soloists, Mark Bleeke was a wonderful Evangelist, delivering his message with touching freshness, quick in his responses, full of variety in phrasing and accentuation, a natural storyteller but an ardently musical one. Curtis Streetman, as Jesus, was fresh, too, and vividly human. Elaine Lachica was a lively soprano, ably controlling an almost vibrato-free flame of a voice, and Jennifer Lane splendidly conveyed - and conjoined - the grief and the jubilation of "Es Ist Vollbracht," with nice support from Lisa Terry on viola da gamba. Thomas Meglioranza got some suitable self-doubt into his warmly persuasive declamation as Pilate.