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A brisk pace for the St Matthew

IT'S FIVE YEARS since Sir David Willcocks retired from his position at the helm of the Bach Choir. When he took over in 1960, he was Organist of King's College, Cambridge, restoring a fenland connection begun when Stanford was appointed 75 years earlier. Now his successor, David Hill, is to become Director of Music at St John's.

There have been conductors from Oxford, too, but scholarly considerations have played little part in the choir's performances. However, the Willcocks years saw an increase in speeds and a lightening of textures; and Hill has introduced period instruments, embodied, at last Sunday's Royal Festival Hall performance of the St Matthew Passion, in the ensemble Florilegium.

My recollection of the early Willcocks performances is that the first part lasted 90 minutes and the second part nearly two hours. In all, Hill shaved more than half an hour off these timings. The opening chorus flowed beautifully, and the alto aria, "Grief for sin", taken one-in-a-bar, was positively perky. "Have lightnings and thunders", following an unusually slow "Behold, my Saviour now is taken", was a triumph, the two choruses hurling their phrases back and forth at breakneck speed. This approach has its dangers: "See Him!", the last alto aria, was taken too fast for the oboes da caccia to articulate cleanly, and the final chorus was wanting in pathos.

But the choir sang wonderfully well, nowhere more so than in the chorale after the death of Jesus, which they performed, unaccompanied, from memory. The violins of Florilegium were especially fine in "If my weeping and my wailing", matching the expressive phrasing of Lynette Alcantara, who was a late replacement for Catherine Wyn-Rogers. Roderick Earle, replacing Jonathan Best as Christ, seemed ill at ease, his nose all too often in the score. Perhaps he was unfamiliar with Neil Jenkins's fine new version of the English translation.

Lynne Dawson took time to find her form — "Jesus, Saviour" was a little bumpy — but sang tenderly in "For love my Saviour now is dying". Christopher Gillett was a superb Evangelist: he engaged with the audience and paced his delivery in a natural, unforced manner. Neal Davies sang the bass arias with equal conviction, his tone steady as a rock.

Like the other soloists, he was often separated from the players. If the Bach Choir would understandably jib at the cost of a set of soloists for each of the two ensembles, could the singers not cross the platform, to be near the appropriate orchestra? A compromise with scholarship, but a practical one, perhaps.