

Transcribed from The Times
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Bach Choir/ Hill
Festival Hall

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And so to the South Bank, to witness the Englishing of Bach's St Matthew Passion. This performance marking the 150th anniversary of the British première of the work – in English, in 1854 – was something of an authentic period piece in its own right.

The Bach Choir's annual Passion must be one of the most consciously devotional outside a church. The audience dresses sombrely; there's a 30-second silence at the death of Christ; and applause is not permitted before, after or during the five-hour event.

It's also one of the most English. The Festival Hall becomes a shy, spring Glyndebourne, plaid rugs and hampers marking out the picnicking territory. This is the day's only indulgence: at the end the audience rises silently and tiptoes away, heads bowed.

The golden mean is honoured from start to finish. There's a massive choral presence: the Bach Choir is joined by the young voices of the Ripieno Chorus. But the orchestra is Florilegium, playing in gently middle-of-the-road period style. David Hill, conducting, ensures that there can be no carping at any extreme: the choral articulation is crisp and clean, the strings' vibrato neither too much not too little.

There's nothing of the *via media*, though, about the *Via Dolorosa*. The Passion happens to be the Greatest Story Ever Told but, for all the reverence and gentle piety of this performance, you might never have guessed it. The tale was narrated clearly and concisely by Christopher Gillett's Evangelist, with something of a lay-reader's stiff upper lip. Where anxious, anguished questioning came up against solo or chorale, Hill played down the dramatic juxtaposition, weakening Bach's musical implication of everyman in the spiritual drama.

Timing and pacing went for little: I wanted to shudder when Judas kissed Jesus; I longed to feel the pity and terror of betrayal and desertion; I wanted the bows to draw blood in the scourging.

Robin Blaze's alto certainly angled eloquently for empathy. And Neal Davies's bass was as word-lively as Michael George's Christ was be-numbed. Susan Gritton made stylish chamber music with flute and oboes, and Timothy Robinson's tenor spoke loud and clear. But an absence of any upsurge in the final chorus made this leave-taking gently valedictory: not quite, perhaps, what it was for Christ's – or even Bach's – disciples.