

A 'Staging' of the *St. John Passion* That Works

By George Loomis, *MusicalAmerica.com*

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CLEVELAND—This city has a major resource in the orchestra that bears its name, a giant among modern orchestras, but it is also fortunate to have a period-instrument orchestra, Apollo's Fire, which in its more rarefied sphere also stands tall. Currently celebrating its 25th anniversary, the ensemble marks the occasion with performances of Bach's *St. John Passion* in the Cleveland area and in New York City; Purchase, N.Y.; and Ann Arbor, Mich.

In the Baroque era when opera was forbidden (or at least frowned on) during Lent, religious substitutes were contrived that craftily preserved much of the art form's appeal. As the closest thing to an opera Bach wrote, the *St. John Passion* might be viewed in this light, yet it transcends its counterparts with a fusion of music and drama that evokes the deep spirituality of its subject while also teeming with theatricality.

It is no wonder attempts have often been made to stage it, including one two years ago by Peter Sellars and the Berlin Philharmonic that won praise for its restraint but erred in presupposing that the stylized treatment Sellars gave it (seen in a darkened auditorium in Baden-Baden), would offer a net gain to the listener over simply following the printed text. Without a clear understanding of what was sung, especially the narration of the Evangelist, the drama was blurred.



No such problem afflicted the superlative performance by Apollo's Fire under the direction of its founder and music director, Jeannette Sorrell, on Mar. 4 at the First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights. Although billed as a "dramatic presentation," the Passion was given in what in opera parlance would be called a semi-staging. Dialogue scenes were acted out, some of the singers sang from memory and several members of the chorus were stationed in the church's side aisles during the middle portion of the work. But the overall feeling was that of a concert. Those who wished to follow the text could do so.

Sorrell ensured that there was no lack of drama. She set persuasive tempos that did not dawdle. Musical numbers succeeded each other fluently, and, more important, emerged with a sense of what they were about and how they fit into the whole. The excellent orchestra proved capable of producing an engagingly colorful sound at full volume but also finely nuanced effects.

Also in good form was the 15-member chorus known as Apollo's Singers, which was

augmented by the participation of the eight soloists to constitute an ensemble of ideal size. Consistently alert and dynamic, the group was especially vital in those choruses, such as “Wäre dieser nicht ein Übeltäter,” in which singers were positioned in the aisles, achieving a kind of surround-sound effect that heightened the drama. At the other extreme, phrasing in the chorales, as shaped by Sorrell, was noteworthy for some lovely detail.

The first-rate soloists are well known in early music circles. Nicholas Phan scored a success with the audience as the Evangelist, yet I had a mixed impression. To be sure, his singing was vibrant and full of character, but to a fault. His narration needed more gravitas and a greater feeling for how it functions within the music around it, especially what it prepares the audience for. He was better in the tenor solos, especially “Erwäge, wie sein blutgefärbter Rücken,” which was ably supported by viola d’amore players Olivier Brault and Johanna Novom.

Jesse Blumberg was an affecting Jesus, and Christian Immler’s singing of the baritone arias was all one could ask for. Pure-voiced Amanda Forsythe sang exquisitely in the soprano arias, turning in an especially felicitous “Ich folge dir gleichfalls,”

Countertenor Terry Wey sang “Es ist vollbracht” eloquently and with appealing tone but was a bit underwhelming in the heroic middle section. His performance was matched by expressive support on the viola da gamba from Rebecca Landell Reed. The continuo group consisted of cello and two organs, admirably played, respectively, by René Schiffer, Peter Bennet, and Sorrell herself. Next on the schedule is Trinity Church Wall Street on March 12.

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