

Inspiring music in Bach's noble work

By W.L. Hoffmann



Bach: St John Passion. The Llewellyn Choir. Llewellyn Hall, March 23.

THE LLEWELLYN Choir presented Canberra's sole major Easter music presentation this year with a performance of Bach's *St John Passion* in Llewellyn Hall last Saturday night.

The *St John Passion* has never achieved the popularity of Bach's other great work in this form, the *St Matthew Passion*, and it is not hard to see why. It lacks the dramatic impact of its larger companion work, being more reflective in mood. And yet it contains some of Bach's most inspirational music. Saturday night's performance nicely conveyed this inward-looking and contemplative feeling, with some very fine choral singing and with a generally satisfactory and responsive group of soloists.

An unusual feature of this performance was that it was sung in both German and English, with the two languages distinctively set against each other. The conductor, Richard McIntyre, decided to have the recitative narrative and the choral crowd scenes sung in English, with the original German retained for the more reflective chorales and solo arias.

But, to be effective, this demands excellently projected and clearly delineated diction from those singing in English.

Happily, that was the case.

The Evangelist carries the burden of the dramatic depiction, and here tenor Kent McIntosh provided an outstanding vocal contribution.

His singing was firmly enunciated and expressive, and he was well supported by the equally clear contributions from Christopher Berentson (Jesus), and from basses Sitiveni Whippy (Pilate) and Cormac Estridge (Peter), as well as from the choir in its dramatic interjections.

There was also some excellent solo singing (in German) from soprano Sarah Shanders, bass Jeremy Tatchell and mezzo Katrina Waters, the latter providing a touchingly expressive realisation of the regretful *Es ist vollbracht (It is accomplished)*. Unfortunately, the singing of the tenor soloist, Richard Kwak, was not of the same quality, being weak in both tone and projection.

The playing of the accompanying chamber orchestra was also variable at times, but there could be no reservations about the quality of the contributions of the Llewellyn Choir in the chorales with which Bach provides moments of reflection.

In these the conductor drew from the choir singing which was consistently well balanced and expressive.

It made for a performance that in its totality captured so much of the beauty and devotional feeling of this noble work.