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Distinguished Bach

By Kip Cranna

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Masaaki Suzuki

The “Amsterdam School” of period-instrument Baroque performance has spawned a Japanese offshoot, and a worthy one at that! The estimable Bach Collegium Japan performed a top-notch *Saint Matthew Passion* at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Sunday, the first stop on a U.S. tour that will play Carnegie Hall in New York, with later dates in Boston and in Michigan.

This crack ensemble of Bach specialists was founded in 1990 by conductor and organist Masaaki Suzuki, who had earlier studied in Amsterdam and absorbed the latest in early music performance techniques from practitioners like Ton Koopman and Piet Kee. His Collegium is already known amongst

American audiophiles, since it is currently in the midst of recording the complete Bach cantatas with the Swedish label BIS (they're now up to volume 20). The ambitious Suzuki is also recording the complete Bach keyboard music.

Suzuki's conducting was clear and direct, with vigorous gestures that were never flamboyant, but kept the double chorus and double orchestra well coordinated. This is a well-drilled ensemble. The strings were uniformly excellent, and the woodwind solos were all in capable hands, with the exception of a struggling pair of oboe da caccia whose failed attempts to manage the pitch were only a minor distraction.

Setting the stage

The opening double chorus (with the soprano and alto soloists singing the chorale tune) was taken at a deliberate pace that gave rise to false fears that this might be a tedious evening. On the contrary, this was an intentionally measured, pensive introduction to what turned out to be a very thoughtfully paced approach to this monumental work.

The chorus of twenty-four youngish singers (most appearing to be in their twenties) did superb work, with exquisite tuning and admirable unity within each section. Their overall tone can be said to be of the collegiate type, as opposed to the more mature sound of some professional groups.

Suzuki's overall approach was one of contemplative examination of the events of the Passion story, rather than an intensely dramatic reenactment. Some of his most interesting work was with the numerous chorales, each of which was carefully varied and articulated so as to make these familiar hymns seem new, although he sometimes sacrificed legato elegance in favor of a

punched delivery bordering on staccato. Suzuki had good success at bringing out pictorial details, like the lashing dotted-note figures in the violins that depict the scourging of Jesus in the alto recitative “Erbarm es Gott” (“Have mercy, God”).

Solo roles well served

Suzuki had assembled an especially good team of soloists, many of whom can be heard on his recordings. The Evangelist was German tenor Gerd Türk, whose performance was expressive and flexible, despite a tendency to glide through the text too lightly, using a feathery tone that bordered on precious, and a slightly bottled quality at the top. Nonetheless, Türk executed this key role with great assuredness and finesse, and was particularly effective later in the evening as he skillfully described Jesus' trial and crucifixion. As Jesus, the Dutch bass Peter Kooij displayed a sonorous, darkish-toned voice and gave a moving and dignified performance.

Top honors among the aria singers go to German baritone Jochen Kupfer (who also sang the roles of Judas and Pilate). Here is a first-rate artist with a richly-hued instrument who knows how to exploit the text as riveting dramatic tool, while at the same time producing a steady stream of tonal warmth and beauty. His aria “Gebt mir meinen Jesus wieder” (“Give me back my Jesus”) proved to be the most interesting singing of the evening, full-bodied and gripping. Kupfer also made splendid work of the tricky “Komm süßes Kreuz” (“Come, sweet cross”), ably abetted by the viola da gamba of Hiroshi Fukuzawa, whose virtuoso work made this notoriously fiendish obbligato seem effortless.

The alto solos were sung with distinction by the English

countertenor Robin Blaze, whose appealing and sizable voice carried well in Zellerbach Hall. His heady sound encompasses a sweet-sounding middle range, with stylish control of dynamics. He often allowed his voice to float lightly over the phrases, but can also sink into the line with admirable force. Blaze artfully shaped the tortuous lines of “Buss und Reu” (“Penance and repentance”); his moving “Erbarme dich” (“Have mercy”) was expressive and heartfelt without being lugubrious, with concertmaster Ryo Terakado's violin obbligato finely spun and eloquent.

Good balance

Makoto Sakurada, a Japanese singer trained in Italy, sang the tenor arias with clarion ring and engaging commitment, letting top notes bloom with a sense of stylistic ease that was a pleasure to hear. His “Geduld” aria (contemplating Christ's patience in the face of mockery) was touchingly emphatic without forcing, and was capably accompanied by Fukuzawa's appropriately brusque gamba obbligato.

Least effective of the soloists was soprano soloist Yuraki Nonoshita, whose attractive sound was compromised by a languid and lackluster delivery and a consistent neglect of consonants. In her duets with the alto, Blaze's countertenor dominated noticeably. The long-breathed phrases of “Aus Liebe” (“For love”) found Nonoshita struggling to infuse life into a performance that seemed listless and brittle.

Any performance of the *Matthew Passion* is a challenge, and the Bay Area has had its share of very fine efforts in recent years. But it will be some time, I expect, before this Japanese group's stellar debut performance here will be eclipsed from memory.

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