



DWIGHT CASWELL — For The Daily Astorian

Musicians at Astoria Music Festival's performance of St. John's Passion Saturday. Left to right: Hideki Yamaya, Leslie Green, Keith Clark and Adaiha MacAdam-Somer.

Bach's vision was realized perfectly

St. John's Passion resounded at The Liberty Theater

By DENISE REED

At the end of many of Johann Sebastian Bach's music manuscripts are three letters — SDG, for the Latin: *Soli Deo Gloria*: for God's glory alone. J.S. Bach was a church musician and it really takes a full-time liturgical church musician to appreciate the workload and sacrifice of time involved in a position such as this.

For three years, I worked in such a position. The average CEO or executive director's deadlines were nothing compared to the church musician's task of producing and preparing music every week, as called for on the liturgical calendar. Many times I prayed for the coming Sunday to be pushed back a week as I endeavored to regularly prepare six choirs singing a variety of music for at least two services a week that were televised.

No pressure, right?

Bach was employed full time with the churches in Liepzig most of his life. The contract of his employment as the cantor of St. Thomas and the other minor churches of Liepzig began with "That my life will be a good example to the boys at the schools and be committed loyally to teaching and informing them." Today, this would constitute the terms of employment for one job. But add to that specific rules about how the boys were to be educated, performance and accompaniment duties and leading rehearsals and composing music that coincided with the lessons and sermon of each week, in two major cities of 17th century Germany.

"I will perform music in such a way that it will not take too much time and not sound like an opera, but rather to encourage the listeners to pray and worship God." That tall order is from Bach's contract as *Kapellmeister*.

Herein lies the statement of what Bach is required to do with the music he composes and performs. Not only was he required to work for SDG, but also, IEA (*pro ipsa elavatio anima*) — to elevate the souls of the worshipers.



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Oliver Mercer who plays the evangelist in St. John's Passion, sings with alto Erica Brookhyser at the Astoria Music Festival Saturday.

Bach comes as close to opera as he is allowed to in the passions he wrote — as we heard in the St. John's Passion at the Liberty Theatre last Saturday.

As the players gathered on stage, there was no resemblance to opera. No designed set, back drops, costumes, colored lights or props. Instead the audience was presented with a bare stage filled with an ensemble that would soon morph into the sonorous sound of the 17th century, with 12 singers and soloists. The keyboard/organ in particular was strange and small compared to the Liberty's Steinway Grand that we are most used to seeing.

The drama in Bach's music — revealed at the very beginning — needed no staging to draw the listener into this very dramatic story that leads to Christ's death and burial. The Ensemble of Oregon with magnificent soloists added words to Bach's setting of the Bible text from the book of John.

Bach wrote four passions, or as Albert Schweitzer claimed, only three. The St. Luke's Passion was written by another composer but performed by Bach in his series of passion performances. He did compose the St. Matthew's Passion, which is the most familiar. Also the passion based

Only a full-time liturgical church musician can appreciate the workload and sacrifice in Bach's position.

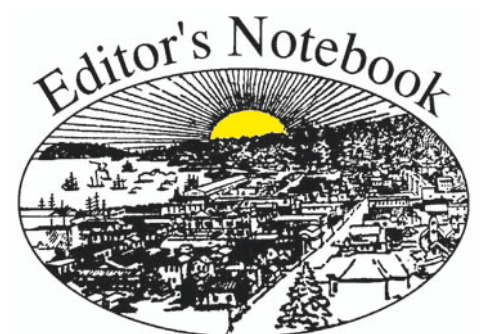
on the text of St. Mark, — lost and never recovered. And the St. John's.

In his comparison of the passions, Schweitzer asserts that in the St. John's, the events are more spun out and dramatic in form, so the text has no point of repose. Bach composed a continuous stream of music to this text, and we only experience a break after the conclusion of the first part.

Oliver Mercer's portrayal of the evangelist was exceptional, singing clearly and crisply in German, the emotion in his voice was captivating. Mercer's slight movement in the direction of the singers made it clear that the chorus would be commenting on the action and words of the performers. It was as if he was just hearing this for the first time and was taken aback.

Richard Zeller, playing the role of Jesus used his deep sonorous bass to convey the humble statements of Jesus when questioned, and the familiar words predicting what is to come.

Singing words of joy, Amy Hansen's voice was rich and clear. Other soloists exhibiting their beautiful bel canto technique could easily have been transported to any 17th century opera of Handel or other Bach contemporaries. Bach's contract forbade him to use the bel canto form.



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Keith Clark's small but mighty Baroque ensemble supported the singers. The oboist, Melissa Pina, when accompanying Hansen and the contralto soloist, Erica Brookhyser, was like another voice, creating a duet that would have been just as beautiful without the words. The cellist and viola di gamba instrumentalist, Adaiha MacAdam-Somer performed an instrumental duet with the bass soloist with such grace and impeccable coordination. These combinations of voice and instrument creating one idea or emotion, propelled us forward — riding on the stream of Bach's music.

Charged with sounding like a Baroque boys chorus of 12 voices, the Ensemble of Oregon achieved their goal graciously.

Bach had two purposes in all of his music — to dedicate it to the glory of God and to elevate the souls of the worshipers and listeners.

I believe the purpose of all composers and performers is to take the listener to another place — wherever they envision that place to be.

Many thanks to Keith Clark and the Astoria Music Festival for bringing this remarkable performance of the St. John's Passion to Astoria. It carried us back to the 17th century and gave us a glimpse of Bach's world as a church musician. Bach, the greatest Baroque composer, was the epitome of his highest calling as a messenger of God through music.

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