

The St. Matthew Passion and Hans Brandts Buys

By FREDERICK HUDSON

READERS will perhaps be aware of the conflicting opinions which have been voiced during the past hundred years concerning Bach's disposition of his musical forces at St. Thomas's, Leipzig, for performances of the St. Matthew Passion. Julius Rietz, who edited the Bachgesellschaft edition of 1854, says in his Preface that in writing two separate organ parts for Coro I and Coro II Bach was stating an ideal which could not be realized. The Dutch Bach scholar, Hans Brandts Buys, sheds new light on several of these problems in his book, 'De Passies van Johann Sebastian Bach'.* On page 68 he writes:

'The most important difference between the Passion as we know it now and as it was originally written [for its first performance in 1729] is the lack of the two-choir structure. There is some play of question and answer already in numbers 1, 25, 26, etc., certain turba choruses are for eight voices, but *one* continuo kept the whole together, the headings Coro I and Coro II being absent. Bach enriched this scheme not earlier than 1736. The Custos Joh. Chr. Rost says the Passion performance of this year was given "mit beyden Orgeln" (with both the organs).'

This implies that Bach used the large organ in the west gallery and the smaller organ set in a gallery on the west face of the tower at the opposite end of the nave. Brandts Buys continues:

'How Bach could accommodate his choir and orchestra of Coro II in that little second gallery, and secondly, how he could keep under his control two separate ensembles 31 metres apart is an enigma. Arnold Schering (J. S. Bach, 'Leipziger Kirchenmusik', 1936) declares it to be impossible, "*glatte Unmöglichkeit*", but the orchestral parts that survive and Rost's contemporary account of the services will not allow of any other conclusion. Whether in 1740 (for the third performance) the second organ was used also cannot be ascertained. In that year it was dismantled, and at later performances—1744 and 1748—Bach had to use a harpsichord instead of the second organ, possibly without the separation of the two choirs and orchestras, because the harpsichord could not be carried up the small spiral staircase leading to the second gallery. From the orchestral material available it is clear that Bach prior to each successive performance sought to refine and improve it. The chorale variation "O Mensch bewein", transposed from E flat [in the original version of the St. John Passion] to E, was substituted as the final chorus of the first part not earlier than 1741. This is proved by the fact that the copies of Kirnberger and Agricola do not contain this chorale variation.'

Then on page 70: 'There is an incomplete copy of the full score for Coro II of the Matthew in the handwriting of Agricola which ends at the words, "*Desgleichen schmäheten auch die Mörder die mit ihm gekreuziget wurden*" (no. 68).'

On the title-page Agricola wrote:

Passionmusik nach dem Evangelisten Matthäus
mit untermischten Arien, Recitativem
und Chören

am Charfreytage 173 (-?)

bey der Vesper

in der Kirche zu St. Thomas in Leipzig

aufgeführt

in Musik gesetzt

von

Hrn. Johann Sebastian Bach.

'The incomplete date (173-) can easily be determined for Agricola arrived in Leipzig on May 29th, 1738 and it can only have been 1739. The unstable condition of the second organ and the plans to dismantle it may have influenced Bach to repeat his experiment of 1736 with two organs before this took place, especially now that he had a capable director for Coro II. Again, as in 1724, he tried to change St. Nicholas's Church for St. Thomas's [as the place of performance] and without informing the Church Council. He made his preparations but, just as in 1724, he was prevented: Agricola's Coro II full score could no longer serve a useful purpose and was not finished. The Passion performance of 1739 took place in St. Nicholas's with some other Passion, possibly by another composer.'

The author of the above is convinced that Bach could have performed the St. Matthew Passion with Coro I and Coro II separated by the length of St. Thomas's nave, in spite of the denial by Arnold Schering and other sceptics, and considers it more than probable that it was performed thus in 1736.

On 3 June the present writer witnessed a performance of the Matthew Passion under these same conditions in the great Buurkerk, Utrecht, given by the Utrecht University Students' Choir and Orchestra under its Director Musices, Hans Brandts Buys. The two choirs and orchestras were arranged 31 metres apart (approx. 100 feet), though at floor level as galleries were not available, and two double-manual harpsichords were substituted for Bach's two organs, the latter provision perhaps contributing greater difficulties to the experiment. Brandts Buys conducted Coro I together with the Evangelist, Christus and s.a.t.b. soloists and his assistant conductor, Jaap Hillen of Breda, directed Coro II and another group of s.a.t.b. soloists. The composition of each choir and orchestra corresponded to Bach's requirements in kind and number, the student body, drawn from all Faculties, was supplemented by professional solo singers and instrumentalists, and the work was performed in full with all da capo sections repeated. The writer was present at the last two rehearsals (also in the Buurkerk) and witnessed the process of synchronising the two forces: both conductors deserve the highest praise for their skill and perfect timing. The emotional and artistic effect of the question and answer antiphony was overpowering: the ear and the intelligence gained an impression of Bach's musical architecture which could not possibly be so vivid with Coro I and II placed side by side. In the four-part chorales and in such Coro I and II unison numbers as 'Truly this was the Son of God' (no. 73) the audience had the impression of blend and diffusion concurrently, whilst the cumulative effect of the double choruses was greatly enhanced by the distance separating the two groups—supremely so in no. 33.

This was a personal triumph for Hans Brandts Buys. He has proved, at least, that the St. Matthew Passion could have been performed in this way in 1736 and historical and internal evidence point strongly to the conclusion that Bach altered and enriched his 1729 score for this very purpose.

The Netherlands Radio Union is organizing a Conductors' Course of five weeks beginning on 20 June. Entrance examinations will be held on 16 and 17 June which will necessitate candidates arriving in Hilversum on 15 June. The instructors will be Paul van Kempen and Ferdinand Leitner. Further information about the Course may be had from the Music Department, Netherlands Radio Union, Postbus 150, Hilversum.

* Pub. L. Stafleu, Leiden, 1950, pp. 376. (The above quotations are translated from the Dutch by Dr. F. J. A. Prop, Utrecht.)