

Washington Chorus Gives Verdi's Requiem an Urbane Reading

By Anne Midgette

Washington Post Staff Writer

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"Warhorse" is such an overused word we think of the beast it denotes as more a tired nag than a spirited charger. But the Verdi Requiem remains a warhorse indeed; however often it's brought out, it retains its fire, flares its nostrils, strikes sparks from the cobblestones and gallops itself, as often as not, into a lather. On Sunday at the Kennedy Center, it was the Washington Chorus's turn to take the ride. **And while Julian Wachner, the conductor, led with spirit, he also tamed the music to such an extent that it was an unusually urbane trip.**

The chorus is sounding excellent: balanced and careful and clear. **And Wachner did beautifully detailed work with the singers, carrying them through every word, focusing on them with laser intensity.** He was less focused on the orchestra, which he put through its paces with ease and a hint of insouciance.

To his credit, he also resisted the obvious; his focus seemed to be on the less showy pieces and the chorus, rather than the big solo moments. The "Sanctus," a rapid fugue, was especially vivid and fine; while the "Dies Irae," though properly thunderous -- trumpets in the balconies and all -- could have gone up one more notch in intensity. Wachner may have done that on purpose, waiting for the reiteration in the final "Libera Me," when all the stops were finally pulled out.

Verdi voices are a rarer breed than ever, but the chorus marshaled a quartet that could at least get the job done. Wayne Tigges, the bass, had beautiful melodious low notes, though he got a little nasal when applying pressure to higher registers in, for instance, the "Confutatis." Arnold Rawls, the tenor, offered a lot of commitment and a workable voice. The weak link was the mezzo-soprano, Susana Poretsky, who sounded like a caricature of an opera singer: the voice artificial and hooty, the pitches erratic.

And the very strong link was the soprano Jennifer Check. I've heard Check a number of times in the past -- an alumna of the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann young-artist program, she already has an active career around the United States -- and I was pleased with her here all over again. What's so wonderful about her singing is its freshness; she has a sizable voice, but she doesn't push it or try to make it sound like anything but herself. It's not exactly a Verdian voice -- which one thinks of as a richer, thicker sound -- but it's big enough to sing Verdi, and it has technique to burn. From shining, floating top notes, Check dug down into rich chest tones with abandon for the final words, "Libera me." **You couldn't have asked for a better conclusion.**

'Messiah' with Philadelphia Orchestra, Singers

By David Patrick Stearns
Inquirer Classical Music Critic
Tuesday, December 16, 2008

To love Handel's Messiah is to be its watchdog.

Far from wearing out its welcome, Messiah's stature has grown continually: As Handel's other works are heard more often, the consistency and uniqueness of this perennial become increasingly apparent. Messiah remains a warhorse, but you don't want it kissed off with minimal rehearsal and inexpensive soloists, which was a possibility Sunday at the Kimmel Center, when the Philadelphia Orchestra initially seemed to be fielding its B team.

I hadn't heard of any of the guest musicians. But few conductors have drawn such focused, committed and meticulous music-making from the Philadelphia Singers Chorale as Julian Wachner, who has extensive choral experience in Boston and had a better-defined viewpoint than some higher-profile conductors who have taken on the piece here. He created the kind of musical framework that ensured that the weaker links would not significantly diminish the overall picture.

Given how well he assembled a fine performance in limited time, I couldn't help fantasize that he might do an annual Philadelphia Orchestra festival of Bach and Handel, since these giants in music history suffer from lack of representation in this community. That's not unusual: Those composers tend to be left to period-performance specialists, whether or not they're on the premises. And although I champion period performance more than most, Sunday's generalist Messiah required no handicaps.

Orchestral introductions to fugal passages were skillfully phrased to telegraph the meaning to come. Individual fugal voices were initially inflected to consolidate that poetic meaning. From there, Wachner built the music, line by line, as an architectural edifice, serving both the music's emotional and more purely aesthetic elements.

Wachner's brisk, exciting choral tempos didn't necessarily carry over into the arias, in which tempos seemed to be designed to accommodate the varying comfort zones of the vocal soloists. That's reality this time of year, when seemingly everybody this side of Renée Fleming who can sing Messiah is indeed doing so with an if-today-is-Thursday-it-must-be-Tulsa velocity. Stylistic congruent soloists may just be too much to hope for.

As much as David Kravitz's baritone was refreshingly clean, the voice didn't have much to say artistically. Soprano Sarah Coburn, a handsome presence and good singer, had much to say but not the enunciation to project it. For all of her Wagner credits, mezzo-soprano Laura Vlasak Nolen still suits Handel thanks to her projection of the words and endearing Nan Merriman vibrato.

Tenor William Hite was in his own class, not just because his medium-weight voice was ideal. His vocal ornaments were thoughtfully deployed to either emphasize or elaborate on what the music was saying. Something bigger was afoot, though: He didn't perform the music so much as he shared the profound experience he was having with it. That's what I call the Christmas spirit.

Heartfelt Veterans Day Salute From the Washington Chorus

Tuesday, November 13, 2007

Veterans Day songs of battle mixed with entreaties for peace as the Washington Chorus commemorated the holiday with Vaughan Williams's "Dona Nobis Pacem" and Haydn's "Mass in Time of War" Sunday afternoon at the Kennedy Center.

The former provided a landscape of war through parts of Walt Whitman's "Drum Taps," John Bright's "Angel of Death" speech, the Bible and the Latin Mass. Ominous drumbeats, dirges and shifting tonalities created a foreboding, uncertain atmosphere, well suited to Whitman's searing texts. The chorus sang with a clear sound, clean diction and a faint halo of vibrato that added shimmer without distorting pitch. Baritone Stephen Salters sang poignantly of kissing the lips of a dead enemy soldier. A beacon of light in this dark work, soprano Joanna Mongiardo's pure, well-rounded voice conveyed both innocence and urgency as she pleaded for peace.

The Haydn work took an entirely different tenor, combining the orderly fervor of war with effusive coloratura praise of God and C-major simplicity. Guest conductor Julian Wachner led a sharp account and brought out grave details -- a strong, militant call of "receive our prayer" and a weighty though upbeat ending. The orchestra's tone was consistently brilliant, and a simple, songlike cello duet with Salters was especially moving.

Soloists Mongiardo, Laura Vlasak Nolen and William Rite joined Salters to form a fresh-voiced, expressive quartet; Vlasak Nolen's rich, creamy sound was particularly pleasing. By the end of the second work, the chorus lagged in both energy and intonation, but by and large, the performance was a commendable and touching memorial.

-- Ronni Reich

TORONTO — *Candide*, Toronto Operetta Theatre, 01/05/07
OPERA AMERICA March 16th, 2007
By Christopher Hoile

Toronto Operetta Theatre mounted a highly enjoyable, all-Canadian production of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* (seen Jan. 5), a work not staged professionally in Toronto since a Canadian Opera Company production in 1985. For this production, director Guillermo Silva-Marin chose the 1999 Royal National Theatre version of the work, featuring John Caird's adaptation of Hugh Wheeler's book (itself a replacement for Lillian Hellman's original) and a reduced orchestration for fourteen instruments. Under conductor Julian Wachner, the Toronto Operetta Theatre Orchestra gave a rapid but exhilarating account of the overture. Wachner so adroitly highlighted the abundant humor of parody and exaggeration in the score that Bernstein's wit moved repeatedly moved the audience beyond smiles to laughter.

Tenor James McLennan's boyish good looks and fresh-faced innocence made him an ideal Candide. The richness of his voice and the emotional intensity he gave "It Must Be So" and "Nothing More Than This" lent the character and the opera the depth they require so crucially. Soprano Carla Huhtanen gave a spectacular account of "Glitter and Be Gay," with joyously secure top notes and beautifully precise runs, all the while acting out Cunegonde's hilarious vacillation between conscience and materialism with aplomb. Best-known for her Carmen, Jean Stilwell was an atypically attractive Old Lady. The earnestness of her delivery of the Old Lady's most outré tales only heightened their pitch-black humor, while her radiant dark voice and vivacious performance made "I Am Easily Assimilated" a showstopper. The prime disappointment was baritone Ian Funk, who proved to be vocally and dramatically ineffective in the triple role of Voltaire, Pangloss and Martin. The chorus sang with fervor and precision throughout.

Unlike Robert Carsen in his recent Paris production, Silva-Marin did not update the work. Played on a bare stage overhung with flags and banners, the piece clearly became, through Mireille Vachon's costume design, a journey toward self-realization through experience of the world's excesses. The cast first appeared in simple whites and natural colors, in styles cleverly blending the eighteenth century with the 1950s. As the action progressed, all the characters except Candide changed into increasingly elaborate, more colorful costumes, culminating in the visually riotous Venice carnival scenes when Candide, untrue to his trusting nature, finally donned a mask and scarlet gown for his denunciation of Cunegonde. Then, in a masterstroke during the heart-catching finale, "Make Our Garden Grow," the cast one by one divested itself of masks and trumpery to face the world again in the simpler, humbler garb it first wore.

Chicago Orchestra Hall

By Morgan Simmons

The American Organist, October issue, 2006

Opening Gala Concert

2006 NATIONAL CONVENTION AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS

Formidable, prodigious, extravagant—adjectives that define the sum and substance of this auspicious event in Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center. The combined talents of conductor, orchestra, organists, and composers were phenomenal. Offered was an abundance of riches, one might say an overabundance, in a program that lasted three hours and 20 minutes. Julian Wachner is a master at the podium with clarity of beat and a complete command of the intricate scores; the pickup ensemble called Metropolis Symphony Orchestra responded with splendid playing. Each of the soloists, Philippe Bélanger, David Schrader, Maxine Thevenot, and Thierry Escaich, displayed exceptional technique and consummate musicianship. The opening work, *Triptych for Organ and Large Orchestra*, composed by conductor Julian Wachner, was commissioned by the Oratory of St. Joseph of Montreal and was completed in 2004. This performance marked the world premiere of all three movements: “Logos,” “Agape,” and “Angelus.” Conceived for a space with ten seconds of reverberation, the work suffered somewhat in the relatively dry acoustic of Orchestra Hall. “Logos” is a sonic tour de force, making full use of colors, dynamics, and rhythmic energy characteristic of organ and orchestra. Philippe Bélanger, titular organist of the Oratory in Montreal brought to the score of each movement a dazzling facility and a sensitive ear. “Agape,” which opens with an organ solo in which one feels bathed in love, is a welcome contrast to the surrounding movements. The concluding section, “Angelus,” demanding the utmost from all the players, is filled with complex rhythms and textures and brings the extended work to a stunning climax.

Richard Proulx’s *Concerto for Organ and Strings*, a three-movement delight (“St. Olaf’s Sequence,” “Chant de Lumière,” “Tango”), reflects the composer’s mastery of tonality and fresh approach to lush romanticism. Proulx, the recipient of the AGO Composer of the Year Award, conveys the message: “Life is good. Let’s enjoy it!” Conductor Wachner and organist Maxine Thevenot agreed by collaborating with a sympathetic reading. The first movement is a set of variations on a medieval Norse tune that includes characteristic scoring for the string ensemble and organ, each respectful of the other’s territory. “Chant de Lumière” speaks “peace.” The opening viola solo is taken up by an organ solo stop, followed by a contrasting middle section and concludes with a serene meditation. An invitation to the dance is offered in the third movement, a charming “Tango,” though lively, is marked as in the other sections by a reassuring gentility. Ms. Thevenot’s persuasive musicianship and clean technique was a perfect match for this concerto.

Another world premiere commissioned for Chicago 2006, Aaron David Miller’s *Sleepy Hollow*—A tone poem for organ and orchestra, followed intermission. Stunningly performed by David Schrader, this evocative work in five sections is based on the story of Washington Irving’s headless horseman. Miller’s musical skill coupled with a vivid imagination brings the narrative alive as he takes the listener on a picturesque, if unsettling journey, making use of a full array of colors from the orchestra and organ. Schrader and Wachner were masterful in their interpretation of the complex score.

The concluding work for the gala was the three movement *Concerto pour Orgue et Orchestre* composed (1995) and performed by Thierry Escaich. A brilliant work marked by relentless energy reflects the chaotic world in which we live, a hint of Apocalypse

Now ! It was most unfortunate that this feat of ingenuity came at the end of a long, long evening of exceptional music making. Having heard the work performed under different circumstances, I can attest to its power and effectiveness. That aside, Escaich played magnificently with the highest degree of musical integrity and skill.

Wachner: Requiem by a True Conductor

Claude Gingras

La Presse

11 April 2005

Two weeks after Mikos Takacs' thunderous and uninspired performance on Good Friday at the Church of Saint John the Baptist, we encountered the Verdi Requiem once more, on Saturday night, at the same venue and again amid an audience of about 2,000 listeners, but this time the execution was far superior.

We have Julian Wachner to thank for this masterful and moving Requiem. The 35-year-old American conductor is active in many Montreal fora, notably at McGill, where he skillfully directs the 250-member choir and an orchestra of 80 musicians.

The same man who had delivered a rather flat Brahms German Requiem at SJB two years ago had obviously decided that his Verdi would be memorable. It was. It was quite obvious that Wachner had studied the score in depth. This Requiem was one of reflection, with profound and unexpected detail from the very beginning of the piece, approaching "il più piano possibile" (Verdi's marking), and even slower than prescribed.

Quickly, the mood was set. Further on, in unrelenting contrast, the repeated orchestral and choral fortissimos, the whistling of the woodwinds cutting through the blaring calls of the brass, never ceased to express an infinite grandeur.

There is more. When do we hear the restrained trumpet solo in the Lacrymosa? Or the divisi violin tremolos immediately before the Sanctus? Wachner thought about all this and other subtleties as well. And the silences. He is not afraid to emphasize them and even prolong them after the most terrifying tutti, or even between the repetitions of "Christ," thus conferring an uncommon eloquence upon the discourse.

There were a few small weaknesses (in the trumpets and in the sopranos) which were of no importance. This choir and this orchestra are comprised of students, and their performance was generally very solid and, most importantly, very moving.

Important comments about the soloists: Dominique Labelle. Suspect due to her participation in Peter Sellars' madness, the former Montreal resident showed astonishing distinction. Moreover, her tiny stature produced the "sound" of a great Verdi soprano. I do not know what to make of the voice of Stefano Aligieri, ex-partner of Magda Olivero and just recently a professor at McGill. Saturday night, I perceived a touching yet inflexible voice and an older style. And, as always, Marcia Swanston favors the Ulrica type of role. The last soloist, the somewhat rough Daniel Lichti, gave us a Mors stupebit in at least three different keys. But these reservations have no effect on the superb vision put forth by Julian Wachner.

VERDI: Requiem Mass (1874). McGill University Symphonic Orchestra and Choir. Guest conductor: Julian Wachner. Soloists: Dominique Labelle, soprano, Marcia Swanston, mezzo-soprano, Stefano Aligieri, tenor, and Daniel Lichti, baritone. Saturday night, Church of Saint John the Baptist.

Organist, orchestra offer rousing finale

Jack Dressler
Post and Courier Reviewer
Charleston.Net
June 13, 2003

Spoletto's fifth and final program in the Intermezzi series at Grace Episcopal Church on Friday drew upon the limited but richly endowed literature for organ and chamber orchestra by 20th century composers. Brought together by composer-conductor Julian Wachner, the selections were notable for the energy of their presentation as well as for carefully crafted musicianship throughout.

Mr. Wachner's own 1999 work, "Cymbale," opened the concert with a bang. Described as a one-movement concerto for organ and orchestra, it is modeled upon ancient Baroque lines, but its language is as current as its salsa-jazz solo towards the end for unadorned, swinging cowbell. Densely plotted and cleverly scored, it features explosive organ and brass pronouncements and feathery high string passages, all framing a ferociously intricate keyboard and pedal challenges for the organist.

Nancianne Parrella as featured soloist took charge of Mr. Wachner's vigorous complexity with gusto and aggressive control. Her physicality matched his role as conductor, which proved as vital and engaging as his music.

He controlled the third symphony of Charles Ives, entitled "The Camp Meeting," with graceful authority befitting its unusually lyrical (for Ives) and sentimental use of old hymns and folk tunes for richly evocative effects. The final movement, a Largo denoted "Communion," demonstrated immense sensitivity within the small orchestra, which managed the intellectualized and solidly structured material with beauty and tenderness.

For many in this audience, who wound up standing and cheering at the end, the highlight of the program had to be the joyous and nearly abandoned performance of the Concert for Organ, Strings and Timpani in G-Minor (1938) by Francis Poulenc. Combining toccata-like organ introductions and soaring full-orchestra interludes in its several internal episodes, the cracking power of the piece offered Mr. Wachner, Ms. Parrella and the superbly prepared string-percussion ensemble an opportunity to have the time of their lives. It was a mood of enthusiasm fully shared by the listeners.

Old and new harmonize in Vespers

Wachner leads dazzling performance - Monteverdi work could be heard as both ancient curiosity and something immediate

Arthur Kaptainis
The Montreal Gazette
February 17, 2003

The Faculty of Music at McGill University has made an interesting pest of itself by mounting symphonic, choral and operatic events that are too grand in scale and professional calibre for an overworked critic to ignore. Now the early-music people have got into the act. On Saturday, three McGill divisions - the Baroque Orchestra, Cappella Antica and Chamber Singers rented no less an edifice than St. Patrick's Basilica to present Monteverdi's Vespers.

This stylistic compendium of 1610, based on Gregorian chant yet full of innovative choral and instrumental effects, is a kind of gateway to classical music as it is broadly understood. Whether it should be viewed as an ancient curiosity or heard as something immediate is normally a dilemma for the modern listener. It can be both, as it was in this remarkably vivid, yet impeccably of-the-period performance under the new McGill choral honcho, Julian Wachner.

The 48 singers included 17 soloists, who moved from the rear to the front of the chancel - or, for echo effects, to the balcony - according to the individual needs of each of the 13 movements. These ranged from the poised and peaceful *Audi Coelum* to the glorious concluding *Magnificat*, a multi-sectional work that is major in its own right.

It was hard to select highlights from the dazzling array of sonorities. Certainly the silky tone of the plainchant (whether sung within or between movements) was a central element. The tenors were matched by the altos in this duty in the *Et exultavit* section of the last movement. The massed singers were splendid, whether in busy counterpoint or in radiant passages of sustained harmony.

Instrumentalists also were fine, notably in the *Sonata Soprano Sancta Maria*, an energetic concerto grosso with token choral lines. Far from making excuses for the period instruments, the listener could only admire the perfection of the sonority produced by the sackbuts and cornetts (the latter occasionally taxed by the high tessitura) and, in particular, the richness of the solo violins.

St. Patrick's was the right place to create a resonant but essentially lucid sound. A master of balancing diverse elements, Wachner deserved even more credit for the rhythmic exactitude of his conducting.

Monteverdi's passages of static harmony can sound strange to the contemporary listener (or at least to non-fans of Philip Glass). Pace and punctuation were critical to maintaining interest.

It goes without saying that the space was visually uplifting – an aid to spiritual comprehension, even it seemed to dwarf the performers at first. The Vespers remain an intriguing mix of old, new, sacred and secular impulses. Perhaps this is why the work is relevant to a society that finds itself in a similar situation.

MUSIC REVIEW

Wachner farewell concert strikes a chord, delivers a message

By Richard Buell, Globe Correspondent, 10/31/2001

The Back Bay Chorale's concert Sunday night was just one in a round of farewells that the prodigally gifted Julian Wachner will be making as he pulls up stakes in Boston, where he seems to have conducted virtually everything imaginable: sacred motets by J. S. Bach and Heinrich Schuetz, the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, contemporary music for large-scale symphony orchestra (some of it composed by him) - which is only to begin the list.

In all of this, the 31-year-old Wachner has shown the kind of technical command, large-spiritedness, and fiery imagination that all but shout to the skies: "Major Talent!" As his base of operations in this city has been Boston University, so in Montreal it will be McGill. Julian Wachner being Julian Wachner, he is undoubtedly making waves there already.

Meanwhile, Sunday night's concert was splendid. The Back Bay Chorale is not a professional chorus, but what a multitude of strengths this conductor drew from them. In the Mozart Requiem it was the firm, focused all-round sonority and the sharp-edged precision of attack that hit you first. But for all of Wachner's alertness, in the choral literature, to authentic performance-practice niceties, there seems to be a fire-breathing Verdi conductor in him, too. Mozart's Requiem is, of course, liturgical music, but in the shock-cut playing off of one section against another (the "Dies irae" carried Sanders Theatre's paying customers straight off to hell and back), it was pure theater. The solo singing offered a vivid, fire-and-ice contrast of excellences. Joanna Mongiardo (soprano), Deborah Rentz-Moore (mezzo), William Hite (tenor), and Sanford Sylvan (baritone) made for a nicely blended team when that was required - no mean feat given the ripe assortment of timbres and vocal personalities they had to offer. This was no staid, institutional Mozart Requiem. It bore a strong personal stamp. And it had the ring of truth.

One of the satisfactions of Marjorie Merryman's paperback-sized oratorio "Jonah" lay in its stylistic to-ing and fro-ing across cultures and centuries as it set out to tell a rattling good tale. You can imagine any number of old-fashioned English choral societies taking to it; it contains some wonderfully doughty, orotund passages for the solo baritone. Sylvan did not, in fact, sport mutton-chop whiskers, but he might well have. Nonetheless his Jonah was a real person, and his plight was real, too. Merryman's adroit word-setting made this happen. It was likewise with the compere-cum-narrator-cum-provider-of-reaction role assigned to the tenor, here the excellent Rite, whose singing struck a perfect balance between ruddy vocal health and emotional vulnerability. As to the orchestration for instruments and, so to speak, for the chorus, here we were in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries all at once - with bright, fiery writing for brass, a pleasantly tart harmonic vocabulary, and a choral manner that sang and talked, and had a message to deliver rather than just filling up pews and smugly moralizing at you. Needless to say, Wachner brought this one to blazing life as well.

Wachner elevates Bach's Mass

By Ellen Pfeifer
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Julian Wachner's performance of the Bach St. Matthew Passion last April was one of the great musical events of the 2000 season. So when he and the Back Bay Chorale took on Bach's B-Minor Mass Friday night at Sanders Theatre, hundreds of eager listeners turned out despite a nasty snowstorm.

If the performance was not as transformative as the Passion had been, it was due in part to the work being played. Compared to the Passion, with its almost theatrical recounting of Christ's crucifixion, the Mass is a more reserved, impersonal, ritualistic work. Nonetheless, much about this performance was remarkable.

Using a chorus perhaps three times larger than what one would hear in a more authentic 18th-century re-creation, Wachner spread

J.S. Bach, Mass in B-Minor

The Back Bay Chorale
Julian Wachner, conductor
At: Sanders Theatre, Friday

his singers across the wide stage and divided them into antiphonal groups. This imparted a wonderful spatial dimension to Bach's intricate polyphony. The great dense webs of counterpoint opened up, became more transparent, and took on even greater majesty.

Like the Passion, the Mass benefited from Wachner's sense of rhythm, the almost dancelike lilt that animated many sections. The Gloria in excelsis Deo was particularly lively, and the Credo in unum Deum was positively effervescent. Wachner employs great freedom in his choice of tempos, often shifting gears abruptly for expressive purpose. This can be both disconcerting and thrilling. In the

great choruses of the Credo, he slowed the tempos dramatically, then switched from grave solemnity in "I look for the resurrection of the dead" to a very exuberant allegro in "the life of the world to come."

Throughout the performance, there was singing of exceptional beauty by the chorus and handsome playing by the orchestra. But the soloists were somewhat disappointing. Sopranos Michela MacFarlane and Cathleen Ellis piped prettily in the Christe eleison duet. Contralto Elizabeth Anker, singing without score, brought a touching immediacy to the Qui sedes and the Agnus Dei. Soprano Anne Harley has an appealing timbre but not enough breath control to support the tone throughout a phrase. Tenor Thomas Gregg brought a confident sense of style, while baritone Curtis Streetman blustered his way through the bass arias.

Living Arts

THE BOSTON GLOBE • MONDAY, APRIL 24, 2000

Music Review

Powerful, eloquent St. Matthew Passion

By Ellen Pfeifer
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CAMBRIDGE — Conductor-composer-organist-professor of sacred music, 30-year-old Julian Wachner has been making a name for himself in Boston for several years now. This listener, however, heard him for the first time over the weekend in a Good Friday performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion. It was an experience akin to one's first exposure to the young Peter Sellars. There was genius here and no mistaking it.

There has been no shortage of fine performances of the Passion in this city. But none compared in setting forth the terror, the anguish, and the inherent hope of this narrative so central to the Christian faith. It was clear from the opening section, with its complex antiphonal dialogue among choruses, double orchestra, and children's choir that this would be an extraordinary performance. When had one ever heard the words so distinctly? All those articulated K's and T's in "Kommt, ihr Töchter" commanded one to listen and lament. Wachner's strong pulse, too, set up an irresistible momentum that swept the listener along and didn't put us down until 3½ hours later. Throughout, Wachner emphasized the almost dancelike quality of the rhythms and the transparency of the textures. He also made the most of the work's extraordinary theatricality and vivid text painting. So, for example, in the middle of Jesus' interrogation by Pontius Pilate, Bach inserts the soprano aria, "Aus Liebe," with its charac-

ST. MATTHEW PASSION
Back Bay Chorale, Emmanuel Music
Orchestra
Julian Wachner, conductor
At: Sanders Theatre, Harvard University,
Friday

ter of sorrowful reflection. This is followed by the Evangelist and crowd who shout, "But they cried out the more, saying: Crucify him!" In Wachner's performance, the peace and repose of that aria was absolutely shattered by the shocking dialogue that followed with such horrific abruptness.

No matter how familiar the story, this Passion struck the listener with the forcefulness of first hearing. Of course, Wachner had a dream cast of performers. With just about one exception, the sextet of vocal soloists represented an ideal of poetic eloquence and vocal mastery. The Back Bay Chorale, joined by the children of the Performing Artists of Lincoln School, sang as if ignited by a divine spark.

The orchestra, which has been performing Bach cantatas weekly for many years at Boston's Emmanuel Church, knows the composer with an intimacy enjoyed by only a few ensembles in the world. Its principal players perform the obbligato solos with an expressiveness born of long experience in the style and context. (How shameful, then, that the management of the Back Bay Chorale chose not to list the orchestra personnel in the program — although every chorister was named.) Among those who should be singled out for praise were the two continuo sections, including or-

ganists Michael Beattie and Linda Osborne-Biaschke, cellists Beth Pearson and Michael Curry, bassoonists Tom Stephenson and Ron Haroutunian. There were also splendid solos (and duos) by Julia Scolnik on flute; Peggy Pearson and Barbara LaFitte on oboe, English horn, and oboe d'amore; Sarah Roth and Danielle Maddon, violins; and Laura Jeppeson, viola da gamba.

As the Evangelist, tenor Frank Kelley demonstrated that he is becoming Boston's definitive narrator of the Bach Passions. He became deeply involved in the events, telling them with all their inherent horror, pain, and shock. Stephen Salters, as Jesus, gave real human dimension to the role, although he was too dependent on his score to have maximum effect. Baritone Sanford Sylvan, who has been a magnificent Jesus, took on the roles of Judas, Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea, and the unnamed baritone solos. Everything he sang was profoundly moving, but none more so than "Mache dich" with its sweet balm.

Tenor William Hite spoke directly to the heart in the aria "Geduld!" Soprano Anne Harley chirped with pretty, bright tone but inadequate breath support through "Aus Liebe" and "Blute nur." But it was mezzo-soprano Pamela Dellal who conveyed listeners to the sublime heights. Partnered by the equally inspired violinist Danielle Maddon, the two performed "Erbarme dich" as if it were the last music anyone would hear on this earth. After that, one could happily shuffle off this mortal coil.