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REVIEWS

Culwick Choral Society at the Pro-Cathedral

By Charles Acton

WE ARE privileged this year to be able to hear both Bach Passions within four days and with the smaller one first. On Sunday afternoon and evening, the Matthew Passion is being done in St. Patrick's: last night the Culwick Choral Society performed the John Passion in the Pro-Cathedral.

Sadly, it seemed to me that there was more to regret than to be greatly moved by. The Pro-Cathedral is not acoustically easy — where in Dublin is? Nevertheless, in the opening chorus, little more than a dozen of an orchestra (from the two RTE ones) were more than a match for the choir of about 70.

Much of this effect was due to the overwhelming bass line from two cellos, a double bass and pedal organ. But as well as that the two inner choral lines were often indistinguishable throughout the evening and I do not think that all of this can have been the church's acoustics.

This was a pity, especially as the conductor, Eric Sweeney, had good control of rhythm, especially in the *turba* choruses, and chose good speeds throughout. But why did he have his cellos using romantic legato bowing in the soprano aria ("I follow") instead of the crisper detached bowing that is surely needed? Violet Twomey, the soloist, was here and in "O Heart", the highlight of the evening.

The Evangelist was Brian Burrows from England. He has a nice voice indeed but was not my idea of the Evangelist, tending towards romantic sentimentality. He knows all about using *appoggiaturas* and so on, but above the stave he almost always

slid into a slow falsetto, even in such a prosaic, matter-of-fact phrase as "and it was early."

One result was to concentrate the mind on his over-dramatic singing and not on the Gospel, which is the work's core and purpose. Another was that the tremendous outburst of Peter's weeping was lost because the preceding passage was overdone.

Jack Smith sang Christus. He has a lovely voice and uses it well, although he seemed a little overawed by the responsibility of the part — he will be even more dignified when he returns to a simplicity of delivery that subsumes the rest.

Roger Pickett was excellent as bass soloist and as Pilate. Peter and the disciple were well taken by choristers. Ruth Maher was most unhappy and off form for her first aria where she was unfocussed and wobbly, although her "Es ist vollbracht" was much better — thank goodness the Passion was sung in English.