

Bach *St John Passion*
(Novello edition ed. N. Jenkins)

The first person to translate a Bach Passion into English was Helen Johnston (1813-1887), who produced a *St. Matthew Passion* text for Sir William Sterndale Bennett's 1862 edition. She appears not to have turned her attention to the *St John Passion*, despite Sir Joseph Barnby's frequent revival of it in London in the early 1870s; and it was left to the prolific Rev. John Troutbeck (1832-1899), a Minor Canon of Westminster Abbey, to produce the first English translation for Novello's 1896 edition. He had already covered the same ground as Helen Johnston by producing a *St Matthew* translation in 1894. The famous Elgar/Atkins edition of the *St Matthew* (1911) - so long the favourite version of choirs up and down the country - uses elements of both the Johnston and Troutbeck translations, picking out their choicest lines and fitting them together in an unsatisfactory sandwich. But when, in 1929, Ivor Atkins produced Novello's second version of the *St John* he ignored Troutbeck's earlier version and opted for a new translation from the hymn-writer Dr. T.A. Lacey.

This version remained the only way of performing the *St John* in English until Peter Pears and Imogen Holst prepared their edition for Faber in 1969. This was used on Benjamin Britten's 1972 recording. For a while, during the 1970s and 80s it received a certain number of performances; and I can remember several memorable concerts when Pears was Evangelist and I sang the Tenor Arias. However, the edition was only available on hire, and gradually disappeared from view.

So, this is the extent of the previous editions which I have been able to consult in my endeavours to produce a new, singable, English edition for the new century. Fortunately I now have the experience of having produced the New Novello Choral Edition of the *St Matthew Passion* (1997) behind me, and I have been able to apply the same rigid set of principles. These have been :

- a) to make the Authorised Version of the King James Bible fit Bach's German notation as nearly as possible - but with a certain flexibility, so that it retains its unmistakable quality yet serves the needs of Bach's music. (There are often more syllables in the German than in the English.)
- b) to translate the texts of the Arias and Chorales (those sections which reflect upon, and comment on the biblical narrative as it unfolds) in an accurate, yet memorable way, taking care to retain any particular felicities in the translations of Troutbeck and Lacey, and respecting the metre and rhyme-scheme of the original. Sadly I was able to retain less than I had done in my *St Matthew* translation, where both Johnston and Troutbeck came up with some unbelievably beautiful lines. In this new edition of the *St John*, those familiar with the previous translation will find that I have retained Dr. Lacey's line "*The Lion of Judah fought the fight*" in the Alto Aria no. 58, and portions of "*Come ponder, O my soul*" in the Bass Arioso no. 31. Troutbeck's voice in the arias is fainter, and can be

detected (just) in Aria no. 48, Arioso no. 62, and some of the Chorales. But his underlay of the Biblical text in the crowd choruses was a useful pointer as to how to make these sections work. Peter Pears' work on the recitative sections (principally the part of the *Evangelist*, which he knew so well) proved that the Authorised Version could be made to fit better than Atkins or Troutbeck had achieved; although my revision of these areas has been done without specific reference to the Pears/Holst version, and is the result of a lifetime of performing this role myself.

Much as I enjoy hearing and performing this great work in the original German, I am one of those who believes that a performance in the listener's native language can have a different, and ultimately more profound, effect. Since most performances take place in the lead up to Easter, they are, in essence, acts of worship. It makes sense then, to do the worshipping in the vernacular. Thus this edition endeavours to give today's listeners, as nearly as possible, the same arresting immediacy that Bach's congregation would have had on hearing it first in 1724.

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