

## Informed Bach Performances by Collegium Vocale Gent

June 20, 2014



Dresden Music Festival

 **Germany Johann Sebastian Bach & Johann Michael Bach:** Dorothee Miels (soprano), Damien Guillon (countertenor), Thomas Hobbs (tenor), Peter Kooij (bass), Collegium Vocale Gent, Barockorchester des Collegium Vocale Gent/Philippe Herreweghe (director), Frauenkirche, Dresden, 10.6.2014 (MC)



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**Johann Sebastian Bach:**

Gott fährt auf mit Jauchzen, BWV 43

Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden, BWV 6

**Johann Michael Bach:**

Ach bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ

**Johann Sebastian Bach:**

Himmelfahrtsoratorium: Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen, BWV 11

As respite from the searing summer heat that had been experienced in Dresden all day it was a relief to enter the slightly cooler temperature inside the Frauenkirche. Dresden's most famous landmark, the spectacular Frauenkirche, was a perfect venue for a Johann Sebastian Bach concert as the great man had given an organ recital at the church in 1736 on the then new organ by Gottfried Silbermann. Destroyed by Allied bombing in 1945 the 18th century Frauenkirche was rebuilt in 1992/2005, using where possible the original charred sandstone, which makes for generally satisfactory acoustic.

Employing a period informed performance approach the music of J.S. Bach is core repertoire for the renowned orchestral and choral forces of Collegium Vocale Gent founded by Philippe Herreweghe in 1970. Players, singers and director Herreweghe have invested considerable time and energy studying the music of the Baroque master.

Herreweghe chose an enticing programme of sacred music that comprised two church cantatas and an oratorio by J.S. Bach and a single church cantata by Johann Michael Bach the father of Johann Sebastian's first wife Maria Barbara Bach. I couldn't see an obvious connection between the three works by Johann Sebastian except all were from his period in Leipzig as kapellmeister at the Thomaskirche and two of the works celebrate the Feast of the Ascension. The first work of the evening was Gott fährt auf mit Jauchzen, BWV 43 intended for the Feast of the Ascension and the second Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden, BWV 6 for Easter Monday both written just over a year apart. After the interval we heard Johann Michael Bach's relatively short Ach bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ, one of his more important works, which is encountered occasionally. I was quite surprised that Herreweghe selected a work from Johann Michael Bach which is clearly not in the same elevated league as those of his son in law Johann Sebastian but I was glad to have the opportunity of hearing it. Back to Johann Sebastian for the final work of the evening the Himmelfahrtsoratorium (Ascension Oratorio): Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen, BWV 11 an oratorio for the feast of the Ascension.



Philippe Herreweghe © Michiel Hendryckx

Philippe Herreweghe has spent his life performing and recording the works of J.S. Bach and I love his straightforward approach without any suggestion of *over-intellectualising just letting the music speak for itself*. Numbering some twenty-two instrumentalists and thirteen singers including four soloists there was no doubt *as to the distinction of* Collegium Vocale Gent who under Herreweghe's direction sounded judiciously prepared, polished and committed. Almost immediately in the opening work BWV 43 the players sounded in excellent form and were able to maintain a gratifying level of consistency throughout the concert. From my bench/pew seat in the circular shaped nave the sound produced was reasonably satisfying but tended to favour higher, more piercing registers.

Tenor Thomas Hobbs displayed a lovely tone, especially in his high register, and with clear diction he projected well although his word endings tended to tail off in the acoustic. Hobbs's appealing timbre and reverential tone sounded splendid in the aria Jesu, laß uns auf dich sehen from BWV 6. There was a wonderful condition to the voice of countertenor Damien Guillon who excelled in his captivating alto aria with solo oboe accompaniment Hochgelobter Gottessohn from BWV 6 and also in Ach, bleibe doch, mein liebstes Leben from BWV 11. Guillon doesn't have that distinctive quality of say *Philippe Jaroussky* but his voice projected with a level of high veneration impressively round the Frauenkirche. Steadfast vocally and unyieldingly reverential there was some haunting soprano singing from Dorothee Miels heard at her finest in BWV 43 with the words Mein Jesus hat nunmehr andalso in Jesu, deine Gnadenblicke in BWV 11. In the Frauenkirche acoustic the soprano's words endings did rather tend to tail off. With extensive experience of Bach and singing with distinction bass Peter Kooij has featured on numerous recordings. In BWV 43 I admired the imposing and deep quality to Kooij's voice in the aria Er ists, der ganz allein with its admirable trumpet accompaniment. I did notice that in general the resonance of his lower projection tended to get lost in the space of the Frauenkirche. My particular highlight was the duet for tenor and bass Und da sie ihm nachsahen from BWV 11 containing such a compelling interplay of the contrasting voices.

After the performance it was pleasing to have the opportunity of shaking hands with Philippe Herreweghe in appreciation of a magnificently satisfying concert from such consummate Bach performers.

**Michael Cookson**