

CLOSE-UP

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ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Handel Society Performs Bach's 'St. Matthew Passion'

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Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, the oratorio that the Handel Society of Dartmouth College will perform this weekend, is not the type of piece that a choral ensemble can pull off on an annual basis. It's long — the Handel Society's performance will span just over three hours, with an intermission — and

The Handel Society is to perform J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at Dartmouth College on Saturday and Sunday.

JON GILBERT FOX PHOTOGRAPH



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sung in German by six adult soloists from across the U.S., two adult choruses and a children's chorus, accompanied by two orchestras. Musically, the *St. Matthew Passion* incorporates the many strands of Bach's work as a composer.

"The scope, the orchestration, the borrowing from operatic tradition of lush solo movements for voice, his refinement of writing for instruments, it all comes back to roost in a hybrid setting of voices and instruments combined," said Robert Duff, the artistic director of the Handel Society who will conduct the group this weekend.

To say the least, Duff added, "it's a huge undertaking."

Based on chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew's Gospel, which details the final hours of Jesus before his crucifixion, the *St. Matthew Passion* is believed to have been first performed in a church in Leipzig, Germany, where Bach wrote music for church services, around 1727. Bach would revise the piece several times during his life, and given his obligations to write a 30-minute piece for Sunday services each week, it's fair to assume that Bach, both as a composer and a man of faith, considered the *St. Matthew Passion* a deeply important

piece.

"For him to spend so much energy and time and writing, revising it five different times, states that there's a personal interest and a compelling reason for him to revisit this work," Duff said.

Arriving near the end of the Baroque period, the *St. Matthew Passion* was essentially lost in the decades after Bach's death in 1750 as the era of classical music ushered in a renewed emphasis on simplicity in composition. Had it not been for the composer Felix Mendelssohn, who staged a revival of the piece in Berlin in 1829, the *St. Matthew Passion* may

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have been lost to the ages.

Dartmouth's Handel Society, the oldest town-gown choral ensemble in the U.S., last performed the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1998. Though it's a challenging piece to perform, Duff said he had no doubts about the ensemble's ability to take it on.

"Whenever I work on Bach, it's always an opportunity for growth and transformation," he

said. "Having spent the last five months with this work, I can say people have been transformed."

In the run-up to this weekend's performances, the Handel Society members received additional coaching in German pronunciation. Many members, including Linda Fowler, a Dartmouth government professor, also began to reconsider the dramatic elements found in the *St. Matthew*

Passion.

"I don't think some of us thought of the work as being a dramatic piece," Fowler said. "It is a profound, sacred piece of music, but it has a lot of theater in it."

For those non-German speakers, the Handel society's performance will include projected English titles. And while the *St. Matthew Passion* is a Christian work, Duff said, there are

powerful, universal lessons that linger in the piece. The *St. Matthew Passion* is a religious piece, rooted in a Christian worldview, but Duff believes its themes of unjust persecution may resonate with an audience of diverse beliefs.

"Crucifixion happens on a daily basis," Duff said. "We may not call it that. My hope is that this piece will allow us to more fully understand suffering in our own time and develop appropri-

ate responses."

The Handel Society of Dartmouth College performs Bach's "*St. Matthew Passion*" at 7 p.m. Saturday and at 2 p.m. Sunday in the Hopkins Center's Spaulding Auditorium (\$7-\$29).

BEST BETS

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