Handel Society Performs Bach’s ‘St. Matthew Passion’

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The Handel Society of Dartmouth College will perform the St. Matthew Passion this weekend. The 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.

“Cruel fusing 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 appropriate responses.”

The Handel Society of Dartmouth College performs Bach’s “St. Matthew Passion” at 7 p.m. Saturday and at 3 p.m. Sunday in the Hopkins Center’s Spaulding Auditorium (S7-229).

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