

‘The Greatest Choral Work that has ever been written’: Wellington Performances of J. S. Bach’s St Matthew Passion, 1899–1941*

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In April 1941 – in the midst of World War II – the Schola Cantorum under Stanley Oliver (1891–1964) presented Johann Sebastian Bach’s St Matthew Passion at the lecture hall of Wellington’s Dominion Museum. Advertised as the first performance of the work in its entirety in New Zealand, the thirty-strong choir (established in 1936) was accompanied by woodwinds from the 2YA Orchestra and the National Broadcasting Service String Orchestra, together with organ and piano continuo.¹ Public interest in the event was clearly high: described in the press as ‘of great musical interest to New Zealand’, tickets had sold out a week in advance.² The reviewer from the *Evening Post* newspaper wrote highly of the performance, pronouncing it:

memorable ... for the oneness of spirit and zeal with which the work was undertaken ... Mr Oliver, his singers, and players had given much time and thought to the preparation and rehearsal of the work; having full understanding of its sacred character and of the colossal genius of Bach manifested in this setting of the gospel to music ...³

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¹ ‘Passion Music by Schola Cantorum’, *Evening Post*, 131/82 (7 April 1941), 5; see also Archives New Zealand (hereafter NZ-Wa), MS-Papers-5309-8, concert programme, *Schola Cantorum, Wellington, N.Z., St. Matthew Passion (Bach) at The Lecture Hall, Dominion Museum, Wellington, Saturday, 5th April, 1941, 5.30p.m.*

² Advertisement for Schola Cantorum concert, *Evening Post*, 131/77 (1 April 1941), 2; ‘Passion Music by Schola Cantorum’ (7 April 1941).

³ ‘Passion Music by Schola Cantorum’ (7 April 1941).

To modern taste, the phrase ‘the colossal genius of Bach’ may seem rather exaggerated; it is, however, utterly in keeping with mainstream attitudes towards this work in both England and Germany at the time. Indeed, as John Butt (and other scholars) have noted, in the history of Bach reception, ‘the [St] Matthew Passion was absolutely central to the canonization of Bach’.⁴

Following its resurrection by Felix Mendelssohn—in a celebrated performance given in Berlin in March 1829—a British milestone was marked by the presentation of the first concert version of the work (in English) in 1854.⁵ The latter was given by the London Bach Society, a group founded in 1849 by Mendelssohn’s friend William Sterndale Bennett (1816–1875).⁶ According to Katharine Pardee, ‘The first known complete performance ... since Bach’s death’, in any country, took place in London in April 1873, with the Sacred Harmonic Society under Michael Costa.⁷

Given its massive length, together with the substantial number of instrumentalists required, it is clear that introducing the St Matthew Passion to colonial New Zealand was to be by no means an easy matter. The complexity of Bach’s musical language and its general unfamiliarity to local audiences were further complicating factors. Across the Tasman Sea, in Australia, such difficulties had resulted in an unfortunate premiere given by the Melbourne Philharmonic Society in 1875, with the critic for the *Argus* newspaper advising the 350 performers involved to rehearse the work ‘systematically for another 12 months’.⁸ This paper represents an initial step in addressing the overwhelming absence of Australasia from published scholarship on J. S. Bach reception history. This scholarly gap is all the more striking given that in recent decades musicologists have investigated the reception of Bach’s music in England, Germany, France, and The Netherlands,⁹ while a major international conference

⁴ John Butt, *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 25.

⁵ On Mendelssohn’s revival of the St Matthew Passion, which was greatly influenced by the Berlin Sing-Akademie director, Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758–1832), see Celia Applegate, *Bach in Berlin: Nation and Culture in Mendelssohn’s Revival of the St. Matthew Passion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005). For further details of the early reception of Bach’s music in England, see Michael Kassler (ed.), *The English Bach Awakening: Knowledge of J. S. Bach and His Music in England, 1750–1830* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

⁶ Isabel Parrott, ‘William Sterndale Bennett and the Bach Revival in Nineteenth-Century England’, in Rachel Cowgill and Julian Rushton (eds.), *Europe, Empire, and Spectacle in Nineteenth-Century British Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 29–44.

⁷ Katharine Pardee, ‘The Earliest Complete Performance of the St. Matthew Passion?’, *Bach: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute*, 40/1 (2009), 80–81.

⁸ ‘The Philharmonic Society. Bach’s “Passion”’, *Argus*, 8980 (27 March 1875), 5.

⁹ See Tanja Kovačević, ‘Bach Reception in Prague: An 1845 Performance of the Second Kyrie from the B Minor Mass’, *Understanding Bach*, 5 (2010), 23–48; Jana Zwetzschke, ‘...ich bin sicher, dass ich ihn lieben lerne ...’: Studien zu Bach-Rezeption in Russland, *Studien und Materialien zur Musikwissenschaft*, 52 (Hildesheim: Olms, 2008); Matthew Lindner, ‘Blood, Wounds and Heart-Religion: J. S. Bach Reception in Late Nineteenth-Century Bethlehem, Pennsylvania’, MMus dissertation, Sacramento: California State University, 2008; Beate Angelika Kraus, ‘Une Passion sans passion? L’accueil de la *Passion selon Saint Matthieu* de J. S. Bach à Paris’, in Pierre Guillot and Louis Jambou (eds.), *Histoire, humanisme et hymnologie: Mélanges offerts au Professeur Edith Weber* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1997), pp. 141–7; and Albert

in 2007 featured papers on the topic focusing on countries as diverse as the Czech Republic, Japan, Russia, and the United States.¹⁰ In an attempt to begin to redress this situation, in July 2013 a panel session held at the Bach Network UK’s (BNUK) Dialogue Meeting (hosted by the University of Warsaw) explored the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reception of the St Matthew Passion in a number of Australasian cities.¹¹

In examining how this German ‘masterwork’ was successfully introduced to Wellington audiences—to the point where the Schola Cantorum could boast a ‘sell-out’ performance in 1941—a number of issues concerning the early reception of Bach’s music in New Zealand come to the fore. These include the ways in which local perceptions of the St Matthew Passion were largely mediated through the British music scene; the process which saw this lengthy (and difficult) work made palatable to audiences; and the problems caused by its transfer from the church to the concert hall.

Robert Parker (1847–1937) and ‘The Greatest Musical Force the World has yet known’

One significant figure appears to have been largely responsible for promoting the St Matthew Passion to Wellington’s music-loving public. Robert Parker had been the prime mover in the earliest known performance in New Zealand, when, in 1877 (two years after the disastrous Melbourne attempt), a selection of items from the work were included in a Good Friday service at Christchurch’s Pro-Cathedral of St Michael & All Angels in New Zealand’s South Island. According to a reviewer for the local *Star*: ‘A large congregation was present [and] ... nothing more impressive or better adapted for the day could possibly be desired. It was evident ... that the selections had been judiciously made by Mr Parker, the organist of the church’.¹² The same author also demonstrated his (or her) awareness of the English performance history of the work, noting that:

Clement, ‘Mendelssohn and Bach’s Matthew Passion: Its Performance, Reception, and the Presence of 70 Original Choral Parts in The Netherlands’, *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*, 59/2 (2009), 141–55.

¹⁰ See Yo Tomita, Elise Crean, and Ian Mills (eds.), *International Symposium Understanding Bach’s B-Minor Mass*, Discussion Book, vol. 1 (Queen’s University Belfast, 2007), particularly the papers: Tadashi Isoyama, ‘The B-minor Mass and Japanese People: A Problematical Issue of “Universality”’ (pp. 344–51); Paul Luongo, ‘Theodore Thomas’s 1902 Performance of Bach’s Mass in B Minor: Working Within the Grand American Festival’ (pp. 322–43); Katharine Pardee, ‘The Mass in B Minor in Nineteenth-Century England’ (pp. 292–308); Tatiana Shabalina, ‘Reception History of the Mass in B Minor in Russia’ (pp. 309–21); and Jan Smaczny, ‘Bach’s B-Minor Mass: An Incarnation in Prague in the 1860s and its Consequences’ (pp. 352–6). Select papers from this conference are also published in Yo Tomita, Robin A. Leaver, and Jan Smaczny (eds.), *Exploring Bach’s B-Minor Mass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹¹ Entitled ‘“Bach the Sublime”: Australasian Reception of the St Matthew Passion (BWV 244), 1875–1950’, the panel featured papers focusing on Adelaide (Jula Szuster), Brisbane and Wellington (Samantha Owens), Melbourne (Janice B. Stockigt), and Sydney (Alan Maddox).

¹² ‘The Special Service at S. Michael’s’, *Star*, 2806 (31 March 1877), 3. The Good Friday performance of the St Matthew Passion was to later become an institution in Christchurch, see

it was not until 1854 that it was produced in England, by the late Sir Sterndale Bennett. During the past few years, however, it has taken a firm hold upon the English people, and it may with truth be said to have created an impression upon the thousands who have listened to it in the various cathedrals, and at the Albert Hall, second only to that produced by Handel's Messiah.¹³

A report of the Christchurch performance in London's *Musical Times* commented that 'Readers ... will perhaps hardly imagine how much is being done in New Zealand (considering the scantiness of the population) towards making the greatest works known to young colonists'.¹⁴

Born in London in 1847, Parker's musical education had included organ lessons with prominent English musicians, including William Stevenson Hoyte (1844–1917), organist at All Saints' Church, Margaret Street, London; Frederick Scotson Clark (1840–1883), organist at Exeter College, Oxford; and George Cooper (1820–1876), from 1867 organist at the Chapel Royal.¹⁵ He also undertook piano studies with the well-known 'Herr Lehmeier', presumably the pianist and composer Sigismond Lehmeier (1827–1899).¹⁶ Having won a scholarship to Queens' College, Cambridge, Parker later worked as an organist in the Cornish town of Probus (near Truro) and in London, before emigrating to New Zealand for health reasons in 1869, while still in his early 20s.¹⁷ Arriving in Lyttleton on the *Caroline Coventry* in June 1869, Parker subsequently took up a position as organist and choirmaster over the Port Hills at Christchurch's St John's Church, before shifting to the identical post at St Michael's Pro-Cathedral.¹⁸ By 1878, Parker had moved north, to the bottom of New Zealand's North Island, where he took up the role of choirmaster and organist at Wellington's St Paul's Cathedral

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington (hereafter NZ-Wt), MS-1821, 'Robert Parker, G.M.G. Hon. R.A.M., A Centenary Tribute' (1947), p. 3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 'Brief Summary of Country News', *Musical Times*, 18/416 (1 October 1877), 498.

¹⁵ 'Robert Parker ... A Centenary Tribute', p. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid. For a contemporary assessment of Lehmeier's abilities, see under 'Concerts', *The Musical World*, 41/27 (4 July 1863), 422; originally from Mainz, by the time of his death in December 1899, Lehmeier had been in London for more than forty years, see *The Freemason*, 39/1609 (6 January 1900), 16. He was surely identical with the conductor and pianist Siegfried Lehmeier who applied (unsuccessfully) for membership of the Royal Society of Musicians in 1865. See Members' Files A1 (AAD)-1-10.

¹⁷ John Mansfield Thomson, 'Parker, Robert—Biography', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/2p6/1 (accessed 1 November 2011); 'Robert Parker ... A Centenary Tribute', p. 2.

¹⁸ 'Robert Parker ... A Centenary Tribute', p. 2. Although Parker and his brother John (Jack) do not appear in the surviving passengers' lists for the *Caroline Coventry*, his presence on the ship is confirmed by Samuel Grindrod, in an undated letter sent from Otaki: 'I was aboard the ship Caroline Coventry ... I am the young sailor who used to take part with you singing at the piano or any other entertainments and very sweet on Sarah Simpson. I also remember your brother Jack aboard with us' (NZ-Wt, Robert Parker, MS Papers 0211-34). Listed among the government-assisted immigrants aboard the ship is one Sarah Simpson, a 32-year-old 'general servant' from Antrim (Christchurch City Libraries/Ngā Kete Wānanga-o-Ōtauhahi, Archives, callmark 111, Emigration to Canterbury shipping lists, 1856–1874).

Church (now Old St Paul’s).¹⁹ As a town of roughly 14,000 people, Wellington in the 1870s boasted enough good musicians to furnish both an orchestra and a choral society.²⁰ Parker was soon conducting the latter, in addition to building up musical forces at the cathedral, where he notably instituted a boys’ choir in 1879.²¹ The latter move was closely tied to the goals of the Oxford Movement, a body of High Church Anglicans whose aims included raising the standards of liturgical music.²²

The St Matthew Passion at Wellington’s St Paul’s Pro-Cathedral, 1884–1909

As had been the case in Christchurch in 1877, Parker was the driving force behind the earliest known performances of the St Matthew Passion in Wellington. A ‘few numbers of the work’ had been presented at St Paul’s on Good Friday, 1884, but it was the two performances given at the same location on 20 and 27 March 1899 that were described in the *Evening Post* as ‘the first hearing of Bach’s sublime music in Wellington’.²³ Even so, the work was not performed in its entirety, with the vicar of St Paul’s, Rev. Thomas Henry Sprott (1856–1942), explaining that ‘would require a much larger choir’.²⁴ Parker presided at the organ, having also been responsible for selecting ‘those parts of the work which he thought would be most appreciated’, an assortment that totalled 1 hour 30 minutes. The recitatives and arias were performed by the tenor Kington Fyffe (who also conducted the chorales) and the bass John Prouse; both men were commended for their ‘most careful attention to the music, upon the expression of which so much depends for success’.²⁵ The soprano and alto arias – if any were included in the selection – were probably performed in unison by the church’s choirboys, a common practice in England and elsewhere in the Colonies. ‘Miss F. Prouse’ supported Parker’s accompaniment on the piano.²⁶

The performance on 20 March 1899 was reportedly witnessed by a ‘very large congregation’, which was led in the singing of ‘the fine chorales scattered through

¹⁹ *Evening Post*, 16/216 (11 September 1878), 2. Parker’s departure from Christchurch, following a ‘complimentary concert and presentation’ in his honour, took place in October 1878, see *Evening Post*, 16/241 (10 October 1878), 2.

²⁰ Julia M. Moriarty, ‘Wellington’s Music in the First Half Century of Settlement. A Particular Aspect of Victorian New Zealand’, MA dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington, 1967, p. 84.

²¹ ‘Robert Parker ... A Centenary Tribute’, pp. 3–4 and 13.

²² Moriarty, ‘Wellington’s Music in the First Half Century of Settlement’, p. 104. Among the English musicians with whom Parker continued to correspond following his departure for New Zealand was composer and organist William Henry Monk (1823–1889), a supporter of the Oxford Movement. He invited Parker’s suggestions for a revision of his popular *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, see NZ-Wt, Robert Parker, MS-Papers-0211-39.

²³ *Evening Post*, 57/64 (17 March 1899), 4.

²⁴ *Evening Post*, 57/67 (21 March 1899), 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.* For a caricature of Kington Fyffe (‘Wellington’s Musical Medico’) with accompanying poem, see the *NZ Truth*, 716 (8 March 1919), 6.

²⁶ *Evening Post*, 57/73 (28 March 1899), 5.

the work' by the Church Music Guild.²⁷ In his introductory remarks, Rev. Sprott alluded to the unfamiliarity of Bach's musical language, noting that: 'the human mind could only slowly appreciate [the oratorio's] greatness, but that they [the audience] would gain some familiarity with it that evening and be better able to appreciate and enjoy it at its repetition on Monday evening next'.²⁸ A report of the performances also appeared in the *Musical Times*, presumably supplied by Parker himself, where they were described as 'an important event' in Wellington's musical life.²⁹ Parker was certainly well aware of the origins and subsequent history of the work, including its reception in England. As reported in the *Christchurch Star* on 31 March 1877:

The work was performed for the first time on the evening of Good Friday, in the year 1729, at the S. Thomas' Church, Leipsic, and then, by some strange fatality, it lay neglected for a century. At the end of this period it was revived by Mendelssohn, who threw into the performance all the energy and flair of his youthful genius. From that time its reputation steadily increased in Germany; but it was not until 1854 that it was produced in England, by the late Sir Sterndale Bennett.³⁰

Interest in this particular choice of repertoire was probably encouraged by the reports of English performances that appeared frequently in New Zealand newspapers. Typical of these is an item in the *Otago Daily Times* for 27 May 1893, under the heading 'London Notes':

The most striking and even sensational musical event of the season ... was the annual Holy Week performance in St. Paul's Cathedral of Sebastian Bach's magnificent 'Passion Music' (St. Matthew) by a choir strengthened to 250 voices, an orchestra of 50 instrumentalists, two independent organs, and a grand piano. A larger selection than hitherto was given ... It commenced at 7 p.m., and the audience began to assemble in large numbers at 1 p.m., six hours before the opening. They waited patiently all that time. At 6 p.m. the vast church was densely packed from end to end. The attendance was unprecedentedly large, and the interpretations of the noble but most exacting work without parallel according to the most capable judges. Bishop Julius [Churchill Julius (1847-1938), Bishop of Christchurch], who occupied a seat in the stalls, was among those present.³¹

A similar report from 1900 described the same event as 'one of those mighty musical experiences which no enthusiast ought to miss going through at least once in his lifetime'.³²

²⁷ *Evening Post*, 57/64 (17 March 1899), 4, where the Guild was also praised as 'a very successful organisation for promoting congregational singing.'

²⁸ *Evening Post* (21 March 1899), 4.

²⁹ *Musical Times*, 40/676 (1 June 1899), 413.

³⁰ 'The Special Service at S. Michael's' (31 March 1877). More recent research has corrected the year of its premiere in Leipzig to 1727.

³¹ *Otago Daily Times*, 9749 (27 May 1893), 1.

³² 'London Chat', *Otago Daily Times*, 11744 (28 May 1900), 2.

Yet despite the awareness of the work's success in London, further Easter performances of the St Matthew Passion appear to have been given only occasionally at Wellington's St Paul's during the first decade of the twentieth century – although it must be acknowledged that extant evidence is patchy. In 1901, for example, the *Evening Post* reported that 'a large congregation [had] listened to ... many beautiful selections from Bach's "Passion" music' under Parker's direction from the organ, with Fyffe, Prouse, and the soprano Eveleen Carlton joining the choir as soloists'.³³ Five years later, in 1906, Fyffe once again took the narrator's role as the Evangelist and was reportedly 'accompanied (as is done in London) on the pianoforte, the words of Christ and the beautiful chorales being accompanied on the organ'.³⁴ A remark made in the *Evening Post* in April 1909 confirms that the performance of Bach's Passion had not become an annual event:

It is customary at this season for the choir of St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral to sing a Passion cantata. Last year an abridged version of Bach's St. Matthew Passion music was given; to-morrow evening 'The Seven Last Words of Christ', a very fine work by the French composer, Dubois, will be sung.³⁵

Wellington Musical Union Performances in the Town Hall, 1910 and 1911

It is clear, nevertheless, that Robert Parker was on a mission to promote J. S. Bach's music in New Zealand, as documented by surviving scripts of the many radio and public talks he gave in the early decades of the twentieth century. Referring to the composer as 'the greatest musical force the world has yet known', whose 'music will outlive all that has yet been written', by 1930, the 83-year-old Parker was able to claim that he 'had always made it an important part of his life work to stimulate an interest in the music of Bach'.³⁶ This extended to musically-interested people of all ages, beginning with his piano students, as Walter Wescké, a London-based examiner for the Associated Board of the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music, discovered in October 1906:

I have to report my great satisfaction with the work presented to me by Mr. Parker's pupils. It was exclusively music of the highest class, and often of great difficulty (John Sebastian Bach's pianoforte or rather Clavier works being largely drawn upon). It was intelligently and carefully rendered and showed every evidence of great care and ability on the part of the teacher.³⁷

³³ *Evening Post*, 61/78 (3 April 1901), 5.

³⁴ *Evening Post*, 71/81 (5 April 1906), 6.

³⁵ *Evening Post*, 77/77 (1 April 1909), 8.

³⁶ NZ-Wt, Robert Parker, MS Papers 0211-01, Lecture 'Chamber Music from Bach to Mozart', 1902; report of a lecture given to the Wellington Workers' Educational Association (WEA), 'Choral Music Work of Bach and Handel Lecture by Mr. Robert Parker', *Evening Post*, 110/90 (13 October 1930), 11.

³⁷ NZ-Wt, Robert Parker, MS Papers 0211-34, General personal correspondence, 'Report of General School Examination held by Mr. Walter Wescké at Mr. Parker's Studio Wellington', dated London, 16 October 1906.

In November 1910, Parker took a major step towards this lifelong goal when he began rehearsing the St Matthew Passion with the 230-member Wellington Musical Union, announcing to the choir at the first practice that ‘if he were spared to conduct Bach’s masterpiece he would attain the ambition of his life.’³⁸ A report in the *Evening Post* a fortnight later referred to the ‘excellent progress ... made [in rehearsals] with the difficult and elaborate choruses, which are a striking feature of the work’.³⁹ Using an ‘abridged form ... specially prepared for its annual presentation in St. Paul’s Cathedral [London]’, Parker conducted the choir and soloists accompanied by ‘a Large String Orchestra’, with Alfred W. V. Vine on the organ and Blanche Ellen Cachemaille on the piano.⁴⁰ Marketed as being performed ‘for the first time in New Zealand’, tickets were available for purchase at the Lambton Quay office of the Dunedin-based Dresden Pianoforte Manufacturing & Agency Company.⁴¹

The concert itself took place at the Town Hall, making it the first in Wellington to remove the St Matthew Passion from its original sacred setting. But, as with the Melbourne Philharmonic Society’s performance in 1875, the Musical Union’s efforts met with a decidedly mixed reception. The reviewer from the *Dominion* newspaper hailed the oratorio as ‘the greatest choral work that has ever been written’, but pointed to ‘occasional blemishes in the performance’, while charitably allowing for the ‘extraordinary demands upon the performers’ made by ‘such an elaborate and difficult work’. He (or she) then went on to praise the choir’s contribution as ‘something of value to the artistic education of those who listened to the performance’.⁴² Rather strikingly, the anonymous reviewer for the *Evening Post* questioned whether Bach was now ‘out of date’, noting that in the early eighteenth century ‘audiences, or rather congregations, seriously devout, might have been found to listen with rapture to the long and difficult recitatives ... But the times have changed, and the people with them’.⁴³

The timing of the event was also criticised – ‘the season for the Passion music is in Holy Week rather in Advent’ – while the *Evening Post* reviewer went on to declare that ‘the most fitting place in which to hear it is in a cathedral’.⁴⁴ The latter ideal, of course, echoed some views from further afield, including those of the New York-based critic William James Henderson (1855–1937), whose comments on the St Matthew Passion were republished in a Dunedin (South Island) newspaper in 1908 and included the following:

³⁸ *Evening Post*, 80/106 (1 November 1910), 8.

³⁹ *Evening Post*, 80/118 (15 November 1910), 8.

⁴⁰ ‘The Great St. Matthew Passion’, *Evening Post*, 80/122 (19 November 1910), 3; ‘The Passion. [St. Matthew.] A Magnificent Work. Wellington Musical Union’, *Dominion*, 4/989 (2 December 1910), 7. Alfred W. V. Vine (1876–1947), Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, had recently taken up the position of organist at St Mary’s Church, Timaru (South Island); he had previously served as organist of Tewkesbury Abbey, 1900–1910, see also ‘Dotted Crotchet’, ‘Tewkesbury Abbey’, *Musical Times*, 45/733 (1 March 1904), 162.

⁴¹ *Evening Post*, 80/122 (19 November 1910), 6 advertisement. Regarding the Dresden Pianoforte Company, see Elizabeth Nichol, ‘The Dresden Pianoforte Manufacturing and Agency Company Limited – A Pioneer of New Zealand Music Publishing’, *Crescendo*, 74 (August 2006), 10–15.

⁴² ‘The Passion’ (2 December 1910).

⁴³ ‘Entertainments’, *Evening Post*, 80/133 (2 December 1910), 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Bach's passion music too, was music of the church, born in the seclusion of the master's humble home, fashioned in the reverence of his devout spirit, inspired by the profundity of his adoration of his Lord, and by the chaste aspiration to speak it only in the loftiest and purest terms of his art. To go to listen to the 'St. Matthew Passion' as a concert entertainment is to make disappointment inevitable. One must carry in his mind the whole tremendous tragedy of Gethsemane and Calvary, and surround himself with the atmosphere of the church in Holy Week.⁴⁵

Tellingly, similar concerns were also raised by Wellington commentators in 1911, when, 'in response to a number of requests, the ... Musical Union ... decided to give a second performance of Bach's great masterpiece'.⁴⁶ Although presented during Passion Week for 'the first time ... in New Zealand' and judged 'a conspicuous success' at the Union's annual general meeting,⁴⁷ reviewers once again declared the 'work eminently unsuited for performance outside a church, and ... apt to become wearisome even in an ecclesiastical setting ... [For] it is a trifle tiresome for one man to sing, "and he said", and for another to jump up and sing what "he" said. Sequence, of course, is secured, but at the price of patience.'⁴⁸

The Passion returns to St Paul's Pro-Cathedral

On 12 April 1912, the year after the second Musical Union performance, Parker returned the St Matthew Passion to St Paul's Pro-Cathedral, the occasion also marking the 'reopening' of the church's organ after three months of renovation.⁴⁹ Notably, however, for the next seven years the work appears not to have been given in Wellington. Whether this was due to a lack of available performers as a result of World War I and/or to a perception of Bach's music as being representative of the enemy's culture, is not clear. By May 1915, the deletion of Austrian and German music from London concert programmes had been widely reported in the Antipodean press and provided fuel for similar debates in New Zealand.⁵⁰ The issue continued to be hotly debated in more general terms in letters to the editor over the course of the conflict. In September 1916, for example, a correspondent to the *Evening Post* writing under the *nom de plume* 'Anti-German' protested against an 'almost entirely German' 'programme at the concert of the Wellington Professional Orchestra'.⁵¹ Increasingly, however, as the war went on, voices of reason condemned the folly of banning works by long-

⁴⁵ W. J. Henderson, 'Bach His Passion Music', under the heading 'Musicians and Composers', *Otago Witness*, 2833 (1 July 1908), 82.

⁴⁶ 'St. Matthew's Passion', *Evening Post*, 81/54 (6 March 1911), 8.

⁴⁷ 'Passion Music', *Evening Post*, 81/83 (8 April 1911), 3, and 'Musical Union. Bach's Passion Music', *Evening Post*, 81/107 (8 May 1911), 2.

⁴⁸ 'Musical Union. Bach's Passion Music', *Evening Post*, 81/86 (12 April 1911), 2.

⁴⁹ 'Local and General', *Dominion*, 5/1410 (10 April 1912), 4.

⁵⁰ See, for example, the exchange between 'Sane Patriot' and 'Aeolian' in the *Marlborough Express*, beginning 5 August 1915 (49/183), concerning the use of the term *Liedertafel*. On 7 August 1915 (49/185), 'Aeolian' questioned whether 'Sane Patriot' 'knows that all German music is barred in concerts for the present in Great Britain'.

⁵¹ 'German Music. Should it be Played?', *Evening Post*, 92/58 (6 September 1916), 8.

dead German composers, who 'could have had no sort of influence on, or responsibility for, the present war'.⁵² Others pointed to the 'universality' of art, with 'Disgusted' in June 1917 advising that the 'tearing up' of music by German composers be postponed 'until we have official news that the Germans have torn up their Shakespeares, their Miltons, and their Byrons'.⁵³

In Wellington during the 1920s and 1930s, it once again appears to have been Parker alone who continued to present the St Matthew Passion, reserving the work for occasional, special Easter services at St Paul's. Perhaps in an attempt to counteract the earlier criticisms of excessive (and 'tiresome') length, the oratorio was made palatable through the selection of 'various numbers ... arranged into short scenes'.⁵⁴ On the evening of Passion Sunday, 1931, for example, 'four episodes from the Passion story: The Passover, Olivet, Gethsemane, and the Cross; with a prologue and final chorus' were sung 'to a devout congregation which completely filled the church'.⁵⁵ This response to the innate theatricality of the work was also not uncommon in Europe at the time, with Ferruccio Busoni even drawing up plans for a staged performance in 1922.⁵⁶ The St Paul's cathedral choir was joined by five vocal soloists: a 'Miss Alexander' (soprano), Mrs Wilfred Andrews (alto), Charles Williams (tenor), William Binet Brown (bass), and a 'Mrs H. I. Graves'. The violin obbligato, in the aria 'Have Mercy on Me, O Lord' ('Erbarme dich') was played by talented local musician Ava Symons, while accompaniment was provided by Robert Parker (organ) and 'Mrs Furner Steers' (piano), a combination that, according to the *Evening Post's* reviewer, provided 'an effective variety of tone colour'.⁵⁷

New Directions – Radio and beyond

In 1933, the performance at St Paul's Pro-Cathedral was broadcast for the first time, by the Wellington-based radio station 2ZW.⁵⁸ This initiative had perhaps been prompted by the regular relays by Christchurch's 3YA station of the Easter St Matthew Passion performances at Christchurch Cathedral under the direction of choirmaster and organist John Christopher Bradshaw (1876–1950). References to Easter broadcasts of the work from Christchurch appear in Wellington's *Evening Post* in the years 1929–1931, 1934–1936, 1937–1939, 1941, and 1944–1945.⁵⁹ This tradition of performances seems to have started in March 1918, when the

⁵² 'German Music' (a report of the 46th annual general meeting of the Corporation of the Royal Albert Hall), *Evening Post*, 93/99 (26 April 1917), 10.

⁵³ 'Disgusted', letter to the editor headed 'German Goods', *Evening Post*, 93/141 (14 June 1917), 3.

⁵⁴ See references to these performances in the *Evening Post*, 97/87 (14 April 1919), 8; 107/91 (16 April 1924), p. 11; 107/68 (23 March 1929), 5; 109/81 (5 April 1930), 5; 111/69 (23 March 1931), 3; 115/77 (1 April 1933), 4; 119/82 (6 April 1935), 5; and 123/62 (15 March 1937), 5.

⁵⁵ 'St Paul's Pro-Cathedral', *Evening Post*, 111/69 (23 March 1931), 3.

⁵⁶ Martin Zenck, 'Reinterpreting Bach in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in John Butt (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 232.

⁵⁷ 'St Paul's Pro-Cathedral' (23 March 1931).

⁵⁸ *Evening Post* (1 April 1933), 4.

⁵⁹ *Evening Post*, 107/72 (28 March 1929), 5; 109/91 (17 April 1930), 20; 111/78 (2 April 1931), 4; 117/75 (29 March 1934), 4; 119/92 (18 April 1935), 5; 121/85 (9 April 1936), 5; 123/71 (25 March 1937), 4; 125/82 (7 April 1938), 28; 125/88 (14 April 1938), 7; 127/81 (6 April 1939), 7; 131/85 (10 April 1941), 5; 137/82 (6 April 1944), 7; and 139/75 (29 March 1945), 7.

Christchurch *Press* commended ‘Dr. Bradshaw and the Cathedral choir’ for producing ‘judicious selections’ from a ‘great choral work which should long have been known in these parts’.⁶⁰ It appears that Parker’s performance in the same city on Good Friday 1877 had long been forgotten, since the reviewer went on to note that: ‘It seems that so far Wellington alone in New Zealand has been privileged to appreciate the sublime composition which is acknowledged to be without parallel.’⁶¹ Furthermore, it is probable that Parker had a hand in helping to initiate the Christchurch tradition, since on 2 April 1918 (less than a week after the Cathedral performance on 27 March), Bradshaw wrote to his Wellington colleague thanking him:

most heartily for the loan of the Bach score. It was of very great use to me and I am exceedingly glad to have seen it ... If you will allow me I will keep it for a few days longer as I am arranging the additional numbers which I shall hope to include next year ... I was very pleased with our rendering.⁶²

As contemporary reviews indicate, the soloists for these abridged performances appear to have been drawn from the all-male Christchurch Cathedral choir, with choirboys responsible for the soprano and alto arias; it is not clear, however, whether the latter sang in unison. A reference in a *Press* review in 1920 seems to suggest not: ‘the solo singing of three boys, Masters Bowie, King, and Orchard, was a delight, in its purity of tone and perfect tunefulness’.⁶³ Although it is worth noting that in a (admittedly very poor) recording of the choir’s 1937 performance, the aria ‘Ich will dir mein Herze schenken’ is sung by at least two boy sopranos in unison.⁶⁴ The instrumental accompaniment consisted solely of organ, with piano for the recitatives, and while a commentator in the *New Zealand Listener* in 1942 remarked that these reduced forces were ‘all we can afford ourselves in New Zealand’, in fact, it seems likely that this had long been standard practice in churches across England (as, indeed, it was also in Wellington).⁶⁵

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, then, live performances of the St Matthew Passion heard in Wellington remained firmly in a religious setting—even when heard over the radiowaves at home. Calls were occasionally made for choral societies to perform the work once again: among them the voice of the 20-year-old John Cawte Beaglehole, who in a letter to the *Evening Post* in 1921 suggested that the Choral Union ‘not ... go on doing the same old things in the same old mediocre way, but to strike out boldly and do something new and really worth while’, with his first choice being ‘one of the works of the greatest composers of

⁶⁰ ‘St. Matthew’s “Passion”’, *Press*, 54/16172 (28 March 1918), 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² NZ-Wt, Robert Parker, MS Papers 5303-01, letter from John C. Bradshaw to Robert Parker, Christchurch, 2 April 1918.

⁶³ ‘Bach’s “Passion”’, *Press*, 56/16798 (1 April 1920), 4.

⁶⁴ NZ-Wa, J. S. Bach, St Matthew Passion, Christchurch Cathedral Choir, perf. 26 March 1937, three 16” acetate discs, MSD16-0155-01557.

⁶⁵ *New Zealand Listener* (17 April 1942), 12, quoted in Nancy M. Taylor, *The Home Front*, vol. 2, *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–1945*, New Zealand Electronic Text Collection, www.nzetc.victoria.ac.nz (accessed 7 November 2011).

all ... Bach's St Matthew Passion'.⁶⁶ As he also noted, it 'was given here very successfully some years ago under Mr Robert Parker and would bear repetition'.⁶⁷ A little over ten years later, in 1932, a 'Miss E. W. Crump' repeated the suggestion, this time to the Royal Wellington Choral Union: 'it would be an excellent thing if Bach's St. Matthew "Passion" music was put on at Easter'.⁶⁸ Her plea was supported by the choir's conductor, the Australian John Bishop (1903–1964), who noted that:

Last year he had suggested the purchase of copies of Bach's 'Passion', but instead of that they had acquired the Choral Fantasia from 'The Meistersingers' (Wagner). He urged that one outstanding work should be performed every year, 'and hang the box-office'. He appealed to the society to purchase Bach's St Matthew Passion for production.⁶⁹

Seen within this context, the Schola Cantorum concert performance at the Dominion Museum in 1941 is significant for marking the first presentation in Wellington outside a church for thirty years (since 1911, with the Wellington Musical Union under Robert Parker's direction). Perhaps not surprisingly, though, the reverential attitude towards Bach's music which had developed in Wellington over the first half of the twentieth century thanks to Parker's (and presumably others') efforts remained fully intact, as is clear from the published rhetoric surrounding the event. For despite the Schola Cantorum performance lasting from 5:30pm until 10pm (including a tea break of less than an hour), the audience reportedly listened with 'rapt attention and from first to last there was no applause ... the music appeared to be regarded ... as in some sort an act of worship, an air of reverence prevailing throughout'.⁷⁰ It seems then, that Bach's 'masterpiece' had been successfully canonised in Wellington. Yet this was no choral society performance with massed vocalists in the late nineteenth-century tradition. As the *Evening Post* review of 7 April 1941 revealed, the small choir (consisting of just thirty members) reflected: 'An endeavour ... made to give the work under conditions as near as practicable as Bach first gave it' – a statement which hints at the growing influence of the historical performance practice movement in New Zealand.⁷¹ It is clear that a new chapter in the Wellington performance history of the St Matthew Passion had begun.⁷²

⁶⁶ 'J. C. B', 'Choral Music: Some Suggestions', *Evening Post*, 102/23 (29 July 1921), 11, quoted in Tim Beaglehole, *A Life of J. C. Beaglehole: New Zealand Scholar* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006), p. 48.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ 'Royal Choral Union. A Difficult Year', *Evening Post*, 113/46 (24 February 1932), 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ 'Passion Music by Schola Cantorum' (7 April 1941).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Ultimately, however, this was an approach that contributed to the downfall of the work in public performance. As John Butt has remarked recently (*Bach's Dialogue with Modernity*, pp. 26–7): 'the St Matthew Passion no longer has the central place in the repertoires of symphony orchestras that it had before the advent of historical performance. The public disgrace of not performing in the 'approved' historical style was simply too heavy to bear for cash-strapped orchestras; moreover, the Passion's traditional outing on Good Friday began to make much less sense as the public grew evermore indifferent to the notion of such a Friday.'