

Singing Bach

I first experienced just how deeply moving music can be when I was about six years old, playing a record on my portable gramophone that belonged to my father – with Schumann's **Träumerei** on one side and Grieg's **Solveig's Song** on the other. Don't ask me which side was side A and which was side B, because I really can't remember. What I do know is that I started crying spontaneously when I heard this music. And yes, I've checked it many times since: that music still moves me. There are many people who recognise this, and apparently it also happens to visitors attending a performance of the St Matthew Passion. In an interview, pianist and composer Cor Bakker expresses himself lyrically: *'Johann Sebastian Bach is the greatest of all... At the start of the St Matthew Passion, I always get choked up. It begins the moment the choirs start singing Kommt, ihr Töchter. The human voice is the most beautiful instrument there is, even more beautiful than the piano. You're immediately moved. And then there's the music, of course... Phenomenal. They sometimes say: God sent Bach down as an example for the other composers: lads, this is the standard, try and surpass that. Well, no one has ever surpassed it.'*

So one might conclude that, as a choir performing Bach's music, with or without an orchestra, moving your listeners is not the hardest part. Singing Bach, however, is no easy task! A fine observation by the Flemish conductor Philippe Herreweghe confirms this: *'Bach expresses the text of the Mass very well through his music, as he does in all his vocal works, but the content is less weighty than, for example, in the St Matthew Passion, which I have conducted several times with the Concertgebouw Orchestra. As a conductor and musician, with Bach you must above all empathise with the text, and in the Passions with the suffering and death of Christ. Certainly now that I am getting a bit older, I find that quite heavy. Whereas, when I have conducted the Mass in B minor, which also lasts nearly two hours, I always come out of it feeling refreshed.'*

We, too, as the Stadhuiskoor, have experienced first-hand that singing Bach's works is by no means easy when Janneke had us sing a chorale, number 23, from the aforementioned St Matthew Passion. The piece is constructed in a very stylistic, almost analytical manner. The melody emerges from the interweaving of the different voices. The text is of a religious nature and highly elevated. Bach (1685–1750) was also a child of his time, the Baroque era, and you can hear that. There are people who are outspoken Bach enthusiasts, and I think you have to be one of them to be able to enjoy singing (in our case) his music. To be honest, I actually prefer romantic songs by Schubert, for example, but that doesn't matter. I find the challenge of creating something beautiful from something that isn't necessarily your own choice to be one of the very things that makes singing in a choir so enjoyable!

A question that has struck me and kept me thinking since we started rehearsing Chorale 23 is: did Bach really dislike sopranos so much that he made them sing so incredibly high for so long? My search leads me into a conversation with a Bach enthusiast, who asks in return: don't you like Bach then? That can't be right! Not liking Bach is like 'disagreeing' with the law of gravity. Fortunately, I find a more satisfying answer in Philippe Herreweghe. Herreweghe is a Bach expert and explains that he has been singing and/or conducting Bach since he was eight years old. It is true, he says, that over the years – he is now 78 – people have become technically better at performing Bach's music, but he does not think it has become any more beautiful. In Bach's day, women usually did not sing in church choirs. The soprano parts, and often the alto parts too, were performed by boys. To quote the conductor: *'Take the soprano parts, for instance. In the cantatas, these are preferably sung by boys. The timbre of a boy's voice is unique. And when such a young boy sings about themes such as life,*

death and suffering, it lends a deeper meaning to the words. That tradition of boys' choirs has, sadly, disappeared within a single generation.'

So, ladies sopranos, I haven't been able to find out whether Bach actually disliked sopranos. What is certain is that he certainly makes you feel that way when you sing Chorale 23 or any other piece of Bach's music. We can now take on the challenge with a calmer mind, because whilst we can still try to sing like nightingales, singing like choirboys is really a step too far!