

DID SOMEONE SAY “MUSICAL THEATRE”?

25TH BACH FESTIVAL IN LAUSANNE (5 NOVEMBER TO 1 DECEMBER 2023)

“Bach and Musical Theatre”: this was the theme of the 25th festival in Lausanne. But Bach did not write any operas – did this fact make this year’s programme any less rich in content? Of course not. Just the opposite was true! Any concerts without Bach’s signature had the ultimate aim of showing to what extent Bach had developed the formats of his predecessors and contemporaries of all nationalities in order to express his profound appreciation for theatre in all its manifestations.

Which also includes lecture – a genre that the festival successfully reintroduced this year, with Michael Maul, artistic director of the Bach Festival Leipzig and one of the foremost experts on the cantor’s cantatas, as a speaker. His topic, “Subtle musical frescoes: unforgettable passages in the cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach”, showed above all how “operatic” several cantatas from his first Leipzig church-year cycle were written, in spite of the fact that his superiors had forbidden it. Apparently, their requests had been in vain.

On the basis of carefully selected examples supported by magnificent recordings, Michael Maul enabled the audience to recognise the uninhibited theatricality of the announcement of Jerusalem’s destruction in the cantata *Schauet doch und sehet, ob irgend ein Schmerz sei* (Behold and see, if there be any sorrow), BWV 46. And in the cantata *Jesus schläft, was soll ich hoffen* (Jesus sleeps, what shall I hope for), BWV 81, the fear of the disciples who are overwhelmed by a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee while Christ was sleeping is expressed with exceptionally dramatic intensity. The ghostly vocalises of the tenor, accompanied by unfettered strings, throw us quite literally into “the foaming waves of Belial’s streams”!

On the following day, the renowned Netherlands Bach Society made its first-ever appearance at the Lausanne festival, allowing us to experience another dramatic shift between tragedy and jubilation: this time with cantatas from Weimar! Two of them were particularly poignant:



After the concert in Lausanne (from right to left): Gabriel Jublin, countertenor; Romain Bockler, baritone; Dorothee Miels, soprano; Thomas Hobbs, tenor; Élise Lesage, French correspondent for the NBG.

Christ lag in Todesbanden (Christ lay in the snares of death), BWV 4, which actually dates back to the year 1707, when Bach was still in Mühlhausen and only 22 years old; and the other, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (Weeping, lamenting, worrying, fearing), BWV 12, was first performed seven years later at the Schlosskirche (court chapel) in Weimar. Ample brass instruments and timpani were used for two feast-day cantatas between these two masterpieces: *Der Himmel lacht, die Erde jubilieret* (Heaven laughs, Earth exults), BWV 31, for Easter Monday, and *Erschallet, ihr Lieder* (Resound, you songs), BWV 172, for Pentecost Sunday.

We are grateful to the Lausanne festival for enabling us to experience one more time “in the flesh” the remarkable Netherlands Bach Society, which has earned global attention through its outstanding website “All of Bach”!

In order to complete the “palette” of Bach cantatas, Olivier Fortin’s Ensemble Masques performed secular cantatas; we will refer to them here as “dramma per musica”, which fits better to the theme

of the festival. We are familiar with the director and harpsichordist Olivier Fortin from Quebec. As an authority on the world of Bach, he sought out the best soloists in all of Europe for these secular cantatas: German soprano Dorothee Miels, unforgettable in the Wedding Cantata BWV 202, English tenor Thomas Hobbs, a pillar of the best European ensembles, and two French graduates of the CNSMD in Lyon: Romain Bockler (baritone) and Gabriel Jublin (countertenor). As chance would have it, all of them are friends of ours. What a joy it was to see them singing together in this astounding constellation, although some of them had never met before. Another sincere thanks to the Bach Festival in Lausanne for this phenomenal, international moment. We, the correspondents of the Neue Bachgesellschaft in France, very much enjoyed this small and nevertheless worthwhile border-crossing into the French-speaking Swiss city of Lausanne!

Philippe Lesage