

Worthy but dull

IT was the Evangelist, Andrew King, whose musical and expressive performance just managed to lift Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra's performance of Bach's *St. John Passion* from the realms of the dull.

Worthy, but dull. For much of the passion was beautifully played by a scaled down orchestra fronted by two viola d'amore and a viola da gamba, plus a delightful little organ.

What their delicate, well modulated accompaniment failed to mask, however, was the deep mediocrity of the choral singing and the failure of the soloists apart from King, to get to grips with the drama.

The philharmonic choir, conducted by Neville Creed, was disappointing. Soprano tone was poor and the overall effect a bit complacent. The choir did achieve some good

passages — a disciplined *ralentando* in the reflective first chorale, lots of expression in Christ's interrogation and a robust call to crucify! The sound was rather polite, even then.

The most important element in the Back passion is the line-up of soloists, and here King stood out for his musicality and commitment to the drama of Christ's trial and death.

His compelling performance was not matched by the others. Simon Keenlyside was calm, dignified and pleasant as Christ, but his voice held no awe or sense of tragedy.

Rufus Muller did not appear to be in good voice, and Nigel Short the counter-tenor did not have much score to show off his beautiful top notes. He came over best in the moving aria *It is accomplished* accompanied by solo viola da gamba, before the full string section overwhelmed him.

Soprano Jennifer Smith put lots of expression into her singing.

The baritone Stephen Varcoe came closest to matching King's commitment — his voice rich and fruity, packed with quiet feeling.

Jane Garrett.