

Surrey Advertiser, March 24th 2000 - Sr Matthew Passion

## Joining forces to mark 21 years of twinning

CELEBRATING 21 years of the twinning of Guildford and Freiburg, the Guildford Philharmonic Choir was joined by its German counterparts, the Freiburger Bachchor and that splendid orchestral ensemble, the Brandenburg Sinfonia, for a performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, in the cathedral on Saturday.

Nearly three hours

long, even with the judicious cuts, Bach's *St Matthew Passion* is the more reflective of his two great settings of the Passion narrative. However, drama is far from absent, and in the interjections of the often angry crowd, the combined choirs cut through the acoustic. If in the first chorus some voices stood out overmuch, the texture soon settled down to a pleasing homogeneity, and the singing exuded confidence. The Surrey County Youth Choir's small but important contribution, the *ripieno* chorale in the opening chorus, came through clearly.

The part of Evangelist is taxing for any soloist, and Stephen Douse paced the role sensitively, with a clear but rich tone. He

was partnered by an excellent, if restrained and slow-moving Christus in Colin Campbell. Two contrasting soprano arias showed the limpid soprano voice of Helen Neeves to advantage, set off by lovely playing from flute and oboe. Contralto Jeanette Ager came through strongly, adding considerable drama to her interpretations.

Notwithstanding a pleasing tone, tenor Jon English seemed taxed by some of his highest notes. Standing in at short notice, Lynton Black characterised the small bass roles superbly. If his tone was forced earlier in the performance he had relaxed by the time he came to his last aria, *Mache dich, mein Herze, rein*, which was particular-

ly effective.

The interpretation was fascinating, in places idiosyncratic. There were sudden alterations of tempo within movements, many of which with a sturdy *rallentando*, not always appropriate in music which, for all its solemnity, is essentially based on the dance. Surprisingly, two arias with rapidly moving solo string parts were taken extremely fast.

The conductor Jeremy Backhouse worked extremely hard to keep his forces together. The result was a very creditable performance in imposing if acoustically less than ideal surroundings. Above all the spiritual message of Bach's great work rang true.

*Shelagh Godwin*