

Schiller Institute performs Bach's St. John Passion

An international chorus and orchestra from the Schiller Institute and Bratislava, Slovakia, celebrated Palm Sunday on March 31 with a stirring performance of J.S. Bach's *St. John Passion*, at St. Anna Church in Karlsfeld, Germany.

The work, performed at the classical pitch of C=256 (which is markedly lower than the modern A=440 tuning), culminated approximately one year of intensive work, by members of the Schiller chorus and the orchestra, not only in Germany, but also in France, Denmark, and Sweden, and by a group of 10 voice students from the Bratislava, Slovakia churchconservatory. The result was unusually homogeneous, thanks to the *bel canto* method of voice training. In addition, replicas of 18th-century wind instruments, which are designed to play at the lower tuning, lent a warmth and roundness of tone to the work. This was the largest composition ever undertaken by the amateur chorus of 50 and orchestra of 23, and those portions of the Gospel not sung, were read by a lector.

Father Robert Krieger, the pastor of St. Anna, welcomed

the performers: He himself was born on Palm Sunday 54 years ago, in the midst of a raging war, and he pointed out that Johann Sebastian Bach was also born during a terrible war. Today, he continued, the world is again threatened by war, because of treachery and meanness. Therefore, we must not take Bach's *St. John Passion* as a concert piece, but as a message. He was particularly pleased to see young people from 10 countries throughout eastern and western Europe, as well as from the Americas, coming together in his church for this performance.

From the opening chorus "Herr, unser Herrscher" ("Lord, Thou our Master"), with full chorus and orchestra, the performance began to take everyone over. Already here, the wind voices—two oboes, a flute, and bassoon, introduced the beautiful element of "singing" instruments. The "turbae" choruses, where the mindless crowd demands that Pilate crucify Jesus, was sung by 22 members of the full chorus, which heightened the effect of the dramatic exclamations "Away with Him! Crucify Him!" set to Bach's harsh dissonances.

Christ's death and entombment were read from the Gospel, followed by the full orchestra and chorus, singing "Ruht wohl, ihr heiligen Gebeine" ("Rest well, Thou holy body"). The final chorale, "Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein" ("Ah Lord, let Thy dear little angel"), with its beginning in pianissimo, and going through a crescendo, ending with "Ich will dich preisen ewiglich!" ("Thy Name I praise eternally!") left the audience breathless. After the warm applause, Father Krieger reemphasized that the ideas contained in the Passion and performed that day are the ideas that will save the world.



Anno Hellenbroich conducts the Schiller Institute chorus and orchestra in a rehearsal of the *St. John Passion*.