

So many moving moments in essential Easter event

THE Bach Choir was founded in 1876 to perform the St Matthew Passion, and its annual performances are an essential part of Easter for many. They are festive occasions but not frivolous ones; there is no applause at any time, though the audience is invited to stand in silence to show appreciation at the end. Thus, in this least cathedral-like of venues, a compromise is made between religious observance and secular concert practice.

A further compromise has recently been made between the English choral tradition represented by the massive choir and the slimmed-down way we perform Bach after the “authentic” revolution. Instead of a symphony or modern chamber orchestra, the period ensemble

CLASSICAL

Bach Choir/St Matthew Passion

Barbican

Brian Hunt

Florilegium is engaged. Its colours are baroque — nutty reeds, softly tangy gut strings with little or no vibrato — but conductor David Hill encourages broadly lyrical phrasing.

He also fosters a dance-like lilt that does not detract from the music’s devotional character.

Two of yesterday’s billed soloists were indisposed; deputising at short notice for mezzo Catherine Wyn-Rogers, Lynette Alcantara recovered from a tentative start but never sounded at home in the work. Roderick Earle, who sang Christ in place of Jonathan Best, also

began shakily but soon acquired considerable dignity. At times it sounded as if soprano Lynne Dawson’s large and lovely voice needed firmer support than the lean strings and bare acoustics could provide, but she securely negotiated the tricky chromatics of For Love My Saviour Now is Dying, with its oboe d’amore accompaniment.

Tenor Timothy Robinson sang freshly and cleanly, bass Neal Davies sonorously and expressively, while Christopher Gillett’s dramatic but sincere interpretation of the Evangelist was utterly riveting. And the Bach Choir itself remains a marvel, its absolute precision conveying utmost concentration rather than rigidly imposed discipline. Next Sunday’s performance should be just as moving.