

Mäkelä Conducts Bach's St Matthew Passion

Friday, March 27, 2026 · 19:00 · Concertgebouw

Klaus Mäkelä, conductor · Maximilian Schmitt, Evangelist · Matthew Brook, Christus · Julia Lezhneva, soprano · Tim Mead, countertenor · Laurence Kilsby, tenor · Krešimir Stražanac, bass · Netherlands Chamber Choir, choir · National Children's Choir, choir

approximately 165 minutes

Johann Sebastian Bach

1685–1750

165 minutes

St Matthew Passion, BWV 244

THE COMPOSER

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) is, for many, the greatest composer who ever lived: the supreme master of the Baroque and the towering summit of the entire Western musical tradition. Born in Eisenach into a vast dynasty of German musicians, he spent his life as a working church and court musician, never travelling far from his native Thuringia and Saxony, and capped his career as Thomaskantor in Leipzig, responsible for the music of the city's principal churches. There he produced, week after week, an output of staggering quantity and quality: hundreds of cantatas, the Passions, the Mass in B minor, the great organ works, the keyboard collections, the orchestral and chamber music. Bach's genius lay in fusing profound emotional and spiritual depth with unparalleled contrapuntal mastery, music of dazzling intellectual rigour that is at the same time intensely human. Relatively neglected as a composer in the decades after his death (though revered by musicians), he was triumphantly restored to the wider public by the nineteenth-century Bach revival, and has stood at the centre of musical life ever since.

ABOUT THE WORK

The St Matthew Passion is the grandest and most profound of Bach's surviving works and, for many, the supreme masterpiece of all sacred music. Composed in Leipzig and first performed on Good Friday (most likely 11 April 1727) at the Thomaskirche, where Bach was director of music, it sets the Passion narrative (the account of Christ's betrayal, trial and crucifixion) from chapters 26 and 27 of the Gospel of St Matthew, in Martin Luther's German, framed and interleaved with newly written poetry by Bach's collaborator Picander (Christian Friedrich Henrici) and with Lutheran chorales familiar to every member of the congregation.

Its scale is unique. Bach wrote it for double chorus and double orchestra (two complete ensembles answering and combining with one another in space), plus a separate group of soloists and, in the great opening and closing movements of Part One, a third choir of high voices singing a chorale tune above the throng. The drama unfolds on several levels at once: the Evangelist (a tenor) narrates the story in recitative; the words of Jesus are sung by a bass, surrounded by a 'halo' of shimmering strings; other characters and the turba (crowd) are taken by soloists and chorus; and at the heart of it all are the great contemplative arias and chorales, in which the action is suspended so that the individual believer, and the listener, can reflect, grieve and respond. Recurring throughout is the 'Passion Chorale' ('O Sacred Head, now wounded'), heard in ever more anguished harmonisations.

For a century after Bach's death the work was scarcely performed. Then, in 1829, the twenty-year-old Felix Mendelssohn conducted an abridged version in Berlin, the first performance in living memory, igniting the great nineteenth-century Bach revival and restoring this colossal work to the centre of musical life, where it has remained. To hear it, especially in the days approaching Easter, is one of the most overwhelming experiences music can offer.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Passion opens with one of the most extraordinary movements Bach ever wrote: a vast lament in which the two choruses call to one another ('Come, ye daughters, help me lament') while, soaring above them, a choir of high voices (here the children's choir) intones the serene chorale 'O Lamb of God, unspotted': grief and consolation sounding simultaneously. Fix this overwhelming opening in your mind.

Then follow the threads. Listen for the **Evangelist's** flexible, vivid storytelling in recitative, driving the narrative forward; for the words of **Jesus**, always cradled in their glowing string 'halo' (and note how that halo vanishes at his final words on the cross); and for the sudden, violent interjections of the **crowd choruses** ('Let him be crucified!', 'Barabbas!'). Above all, listen for the great **arias**, islands of reflection of heartbreaking beauty. The most famous is the alto aria 'Erbarme dich' ('Have mercy'), sung after Peter's denial, with its sobbing solo violin, one of the most moving pieces of music ever composed. Listen, too, for the recurring **Passion Chorale**, its harmonies growing darker with each return, and for the tender final chorus, 'Wir setzen uns mit

Tränen nieder' ('In tears we sit'), a gentle, rocking lullaby that lays Christ to rest and brings this immense work to its consoling close.

Tonight's artists

Maximilian Schmitt *Evangelist*

The Evangelist is the spine of the St Matthew Passion: the tenor who tells the whole story in recitative, by turns urgent, tender and anguished, and who must hold the vast structure together across three hours. Maximilian Schmitt, a noted Bach tenor experienced in exactly this role, brings the narrative its clarity, flexibility and emotional truth.

Maximilian Schmitt is a German tenor who began as a chorister with the Regensburger Domspatzen and trained at the Berlin University of the Arts. After the Munich opera studio and a period in the ensemble at Mannheim, he built an international career on the concert platform and in Mozart roles (Tamino, Don Ottavio). He is especially admired as a Bach singer, and the role of the Evangelist in the Passions, the narrator who carries the entire drama, is one of his specialities.

Matthew Brook *Christus*

The role of Christus (Jesus) asks for a bass of warmth, gravity and humanity, the still centre around whom the drama turns, his words always wrapped in their string 'halo.' Matthew Brook, one of today's most experienced Bach singers, brings the necessary dignity and depth to this most sacred of roles.

Matthew Brook is a British bass-baritone with a worldwide reputation in the music of Bach and Handel, admired for the honesty and directness of his singing. He came to wide notice with the Dunedin Consort's 2007 Gramophone Award-winning Messiah and has since recorded and performed the great Baroque oratorios and Passions across the world, working with many of the leading period-performance conductors.

Julia Lezhneva *soprano*

The soprano arias of the St Matthew Passion are among its most radiant moments of reflection: pure, soaring music that calls for a voice of crystalline beauty and impeccable control. Julia Lezhneva, famed for exactly those qualities, brings them an other-worldly serenity.

Julia Lezhneva, born on Sakhalin Island in 1989, is one of the most acclaimed sopranos of her generation, celebrated for the purity and agility of her voice. In 2009, aged nineteen, she became the youngest winner of the Mirjam Helin International Singing Competition; she sang at the 2010 Classical Brit Awards and has recorded a series of solo albums for Decca. She is especially renowned in Baroque and Classical repertoire, where her flawless technique and pure tone are ideally suited to Bach.

Tim Mead *countertenor*

The alto arias are the emotional heart of the Passion, above all ‘Erbar-me dich,’ the great plea for mercy sung after Peter’s denial, with its weeping solo violin. Sung here by the countertenor Tim Mead, whose warm, elegant voice is ideally suited to this music, they provide the work’s most profound moments of grief and consolation.

Tim Mead, born in Chelmsford in 1981, is one of the leading countertenors of his generation, prized for the warmth, evenness and stylistic elegance of his voice. A former choral scholar at King’s College, Cambridge, he sang the title role of Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* at Glyndebourne in 2006 and has since sung with the world’s leading Baroque conductors and ensembles.

Laurence Kilsby *tenor*

Beyond the Evangelist, the St Matthew Passion gives the tenor voice a series of searching arias of reflection. The young British tenor Laurence Kilsby, admired for his expressive, characterful singing, brings them freshness and ardour.

Laurence Kilsby is a young British tenor rapidly gaining international recognition for his vivid stage presence and expressive musicianship. In 2023 he was a winner of the international song competition run by the Heidelberger Frühling festival. He is increasingly in demand across opera, song and the Baroque repertoire.

Krešimir Stražanac *bass*

The bass arias of the Passion include some of its most consoling music, among them ‘Mache dich, mein Herze, rein’ (‘Make thyself pure, my heart’), sung as Christ is laid in the tomb. Krešimir Stražanac, a noted Bach interpreter, brings them their needed warmth and gravity.

Krešimir Stražanac is a Croatian bass-baritone with a flourishing international career. Trained in Stuttgart, he became a permanent member of the Zurich Opera for seven seasons and has built a wide repertoire on stage and in concert. He is particularly renowned in the Baroque repertoire, especially the music of Bach, appearing with leading period-instrument ensembles across Europe.

Netherlands Chamber Choir *choir*

The St Matthew Passion is built on the interplay of two choirs, who lament, narrate the crowd’s part, and sing the great chorales. The Netherlands Chamber Choir, one of the world’s foremost professional choirs, supplies the precision, blend and dramatic power this monumental score demands.

The Netherlands Chamber Choir (Nederlands Kamerkoor), founded in 1937, is among the most renowned professional chamber choirs in the world. It is celebrated for the precision, blend and expressive range of its singing across an enormous repertoire, from Renaissance polyphony to a long list of newly commissioned works, and it collaborates regularly with leading orchestras and conductors. Its artistry brings both refinement and dramatic presence to the choral writing in Weill’s *Der Silbersee*.

National Children's Choir *choir*

In the towering opening and closing movements of Part One, Bach crowns the two adult choirs with a separate choir of high voices intoning a chorale tune (‘O Lamb of God, unspotted’) above the texture, a sound of piercing innocence amid the grief. The National Children’s Choir supplies these soaring young voices, one of the work’s most unforgettable effects.

The National Children’s Choir (Nationaal Kinderkoor), part of the Nationale Koren, is a leading Dutch choir of young voices and a regular partner of the country’s orchestras for works requiring a children’s chorus.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven**

John Eliot Gardiner, Vintage 2015

A conductor's portrait of Bach, with a chapter on the Passions, by a musician who has performed the St Matthew Passion many times.

ACCESSIBLE **Hearing Bach's Passions**

Daniel R. Melamed, Oxford University Press 2005

A short book for listeners on how Bach's Passions were composed and first heard, with a chapter on the St Matthew Passion.

DEEPER **Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician**

Christoph Wolff, W. W. Norton & Company 2001

The standard scholarly life of Bach, placing the St Matthew Passion in his Leipzig career.

SOURCES

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2. St Matthew Passion, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/orchestra/symphonic-repertoire/st-matthew-passion/>
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4. Johann Sebastian Bach, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Sebastian_Bach
5. Maximilian Schmitt, Wikipedia (German). https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maximilian_Schmitt
6. Matthew Brook, Bass Baritone, Matthew Brook. <https://www.matthewbrook.com/>
7. Julia Lezhneva, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julia_Lezhneva
8. Tim Mead, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Mead
9. Heidelberger Frühling, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heidelberger_Fr%C3%BChling
10. Krešimir Stražanac: Biography, Krešimir Stražanac. <https://www.strazanac.com/index.php/biography>
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13. Hearing Bach's Passions, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780195347036>
14. Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393322569>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-03-27-makela>

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