

Leonardo García Alarcón conducts Bach's St Matthew Passion

Friday, March 19, 2027 · 19:30 · Concertgebouw

Leonardo García Alarcón, conductor · Valerio Contaldo, Evangelist · Andreas Wolf, Christus · Sophie Junker, soprano · Hugh Cutting, countertenor · Laurence Kilsby, tenor · Alex Rosen, bass · Netherlands Chamber Choir, choir · National Children's Choir, choir

approximately 165 minutes

Johann Sebastian Bach

1685–1750

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

Bach's St Matthew Passion was written for the Good Friday vespers at St Thomas's Church in Leipzig, where he had been cantor since 1723. It is now generally thought to have been heard there for the first time on 11 April 1727, although some older accounts place the first performance two years later. If the earlier date is right, the work turns three hundred in the spring of 2027.

The text has three layers. The first is the Gospel itself, chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew in Luther's German, from the plot against Jesus to the sealing of the tomb. The second is poetry by Christian Friedrich

165 minutes

Henrici, a Leipzig writer who published as Picander: arias and choruses that stop the story and reflect on it. The third is the chorales, Lutheran hymns that Bach's congregation knew by heart. Bach divided his performers into two groups, each with its own singers and its own orchestra, and Picander's verses often set them in dialogue, one asking and the other answering.

Bach performed the Passion again in later years and revised it. After his death it fell out of use. On 11 March 1829 the twenty-year-old Felix Mendelssohn conducted it in Berlin, cut and adapted to the taste of his day, and the success of that performance set off the revival of Bach's music in the nineteenth century.

In Amsterdam the piece has a history of its own. Willem Mengelberg, then chief conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, began performing it every year on Palm Sunday in 1899, with large forces and broad tempos. In 1975 Nikolaus Harnoncourt came as a guest, proposed the St John Passion instead, and cut the orchestra to chamber size. Since then the orchestra has alternated the two Passions and has played them with the lessons of historical performance in mind.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening chorus is a vast lament over a slow, steady tread in the bass. The first choir calls 'Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen' (Come, daughters, help me mourn) and the second breaks in with single-word questions: whom? how? what? Above them a line of high voices, here the children's choir, sings the chorale 'O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig' in long notes.

From there the Evangelist, a tenor, tells the story in recitative with only the continuo instruments beneath him. Whenever Jesus speaks, the strings surround his voice with sustained chords, an effect often called a halo. It is withdrawn once, at his last words from the cross, 'Eli, Eli, lama asabthani'.

The chorus plays two parts. As the crowd it is quick and violent: the one-word shout 'Barrabam!', and 'Lass ihn kreuzigen' (Let him be crucified), sung twice. In the chorales it is the congregation. One melody, 'O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden', returns five times with different verses, and its last appearance, just after the death of Jesus, is one of the stillest moments of the evening.

The arias are sung by voices outside the story, each paired with one or a few solo instruments. 'Erbarme dich' (Have mercy), for alto, follows Peter's denial. In the soprano's 'Aus Liebe will mein

Heiland sterben' (Out of love my Saviour is willing to die) Bach removes the strings and the bass line altogether, something very rare in Baroque music, and the voice seems to hang in the air. Near the end the bass sings 'Mache dich, mein Herze, rein' (Make yourself pure, my heart), a calm, rocking aria for the evening of the burial.

The Passion closes without any hint of Easter. The two choirs sit down at the tomb in 'Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder' (We sit down in tears) and wish the dead man rest.

Tonight's artists

Valerio Contaldo *Evangelist*

The Evangelist tells the whole story, in recitative, across some three hours, and the pacing of the evening depends on him more than on anyone except the conductor. Valerio Contaldo has worked with Leonardo García Alarcón before, in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, and the Bach Passions are a regular part of his concert work.

Valerio Contaldo is a tenor who was born in Italy and grew up in the Swiss canton of Valais. He trained first as a classical guitarist and then studied singing with Gary Magby at the Lausanne Conservatoire. He is best known in Baroque music, from Monteverdi, whose *Orfeo* he has sung in the title role, to the Passions and oratorios of Bach.

Andreas Wolf *Christus*

The words of Jesus are sung by a bass, and each time he speaks the strings of the first orchestra hold long chords around the voice. Andreas Wolf, who sings a good deal of Bach and Handel, takes the part here.

Andreas Wolf is a German bass-baritone. He had his first musical training at the specialist music school in Wernigerode, where he sang in the Rundfunk-Jugendchor, and from 2002 studied at the University of Music in Detmold. On stage he has sung Mozart roles such as Guglielmo and Leporello; in concert he is heard mainly in Bach, Handel and other Baroque and Classical repertoire.

Sophie Junker *soprano*

The soprano has the aria that stands at the centre of Part Two, ‘Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben’, sung without strings or continuo. Sophie Junker, who has made her name in Handel and other Baroque repertoire, sings it.

Sophie Junker, born in 1985, is a Belgian soprano. She studied at the IMEP in Namur and at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, and in 2010 she won first prize in the London Handel Festival singing competition. Much of her work has been in Baroque music, Handel’s above all.

Hugh Cutting *countertenor*

The alto arias go to a countertenor in these performances. They include ‘Erbarme dich’, sung after Peter has denied Jesus for the third time, one of the best-known arias Bach wrote.

Hugh Cutting is a British countertenor. He was a choral scholar at St John’s College, Cambridge, and went on to the Royal College of Music. In 2021 he became the first countertenor to win the Kathleen Ferrier Award, and he was a BBC New Generation Artist from 2022 to 2024. He sings Baroque opera and oratorio and also gives song recitals.

Laurence Kilsby *tenor*

With the Evangelist’s narration given to another singer, Laurence Kilsby sings the tenor arias, among them ‘Geduld’ (Patience) in Part Two. He was the tenor soloist in the orchestra’s St Matthew Passion a year earlier.

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.

Alex Rosen *bass*

The bass arias include ‘Mache dich, mein Herze, rein’, sung in the evening calm after the crucifixion. Alex Rosen has toured Bach’s St John Passion with Les Arts Florissants.

Alex Rosen is an American bass from California. He trained at the Juilliard School and made his international debut with Les Arts Florissants under William Christie, on tours of Haydn’s Creation and Handel’s Acis and Galatea. He appears in opera and in concert, often in Baroque repertoire and with period-instrument ensembles.

Netherlands Chamber Choir *choir*

Bach wrote for two choirs that answer each other across the stage, sing together as the crowd and join in the chorales. Nikolaus Harnoncourt first brought the Netherlands Chamber Choir into the orchestra's Passion performances in 1975, for the St John Passion.

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 opening chorus a separate line of high voices sings the chorale 'O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig' over the two adult choirs. That line belongs to the National Children's Choir.

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 by a musician who performed the Passions for decades, with a long chapter on the St Matthew Passion as a piece of drama.

ACCESSIBLE **Hearing Bach's Passions**

Daniel R. Melamed, Oxford University Press 2005

A short book for listeners on how Bach's Passions were put together and first performed in Leipzig, including what the two choirs of the St Matthew Passion really were.

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

Christoph Wolff, W. W. Norton & Company 2001

The standard scholarly life of Bach, which places the St Matthew Passion in his first years as cantor of St Thomas's in Leipzig.

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