

BACH NOTES EXTRA



About Bach's great Passions

Passiontide Bach around UK and at Leipzig
Holy Week Festival at St John's Smith Square

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The picture below is of Leipzig's Thomanerchor who will be performing Bach's St Matthew Passion/Matthäus-Passion on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday in Thomaskirche



About Bach's Passions

Today, we are inclined to refer to Easter as including Good Friday. Not so at Leipzig in 1720s. There was a clear distinction between the two days - Good Friday and Easter Sunday - and that remains the case everywhere nearly 300 years on. As part of his duties as Leipzig Cantor, Bach was required to provide suitable "Passions Musik" as part of the Liturgy and Meditation for Good Friday, a naturally significant date for the Lutheran Church. The two main churches, Thomaskirche and Nikolaikirche, took it in turn to host the annual Passion, the anticipation of which was keenly felt by the Leipzig congregation. They probably didn't sing the chorales - harmonies far too complex! Today, a real feeling of 'togetherness' and 'involvement' is experienced at Passion performances if the audience sings carefully chosen chorales...and they can. This has been a feature of LBS Passion performances since 1952...sung in German too.

Bach composed three Passions (St John, St Matthew, St Mark)

St John Passion BWV 245 is in four versions - 1724, 1725, 1732 and 1749. In Holy Week 1724, the Good Friday performance was arranged for Thomaskirche, but someone somewhere alerted the Clergy that it was the turn of the Nikolaikirche... so they upped sticks and moved the Service up the road. They could do that sort of thing in those days. Imagine having to do that now! The first performance of **St Matthew Passion BWV 244b** is attributed to 11 April 1727 in its early version, a further performance followed in 1729, a revised version was performed in 1736 (BWV 244, the version we most perform today) and another, with some revisions, in 1742. All at Leipzig. The music of **St Mark Passion BWV 247** performed in 1731 is mostly lost, although the libretto by Picander survives and it is from this text that reconstructions have been attempted using movements from Cantata BWV 198 (Trauerode) among others. A fourth **St Luke Passion BWV 246** originally attributed to Bach is now regarded as apocryphal.

The essential meaning of the Passions is enshrined in the chorales that punctuate the works so sensitively. They appear at key points as the dramatic pace quickens, events unfold, the day of Christ's Crucifixion draws ever nearer and in the immediate aftermath. The music in both the St John and the St Matthew runs the gamut of human emotion and in the tragedy being unveiled before our very eyes and ears, we are encouraged to see the hope for all of us that is undoubtedly expressed in Bach's creations. In the St. John this is best conveyed in the final chorale of the 1724 version; in the St Matthew there is an implicit expression of hope in the towering *cantus firmus* of the dramatic opening movement, perhaps not immediately evident so much in the words "*O Lamm Gottes unschuldig* (O guiltless Lamb of God), but reflected in Bach's own inimitable, subtle, musical way - this chorale is set in the major key performed over the eight part choir/orchestra music which is written in the minor key. For Easter Sunday, Bach reflected the sentiments of the day in two glorious Cantatas BWV 4 and BWV 31, both earlier works revived at Leipzig. Wherever you are and at whichever performance, enjoy your own Bach Passion experience this year. **Margaret Steinitz, LBS Artistic Director**

Read our Factfile about significant UK performances of St Matthew Passion on p.2.

- **Factfile:**

- 1st English performance of St Matthew Passion - 6 April 1854, Hanover Square Rooms, directed by William Sterndale Bennett. Translation by Helen Johnston
- 1st performance in UK of St Matthew Passion in its complete & original German form (1736 score) on 22 March 1952, St. Bartholomew-the-Great EC1, LBS choir/Riddick Orchestra/Paul Steinitz
- 1st 'live' performance in UK of St Matthew Passion Early Version (BWV 244b - 1727), Steinitz Bach Players/Anthony Robson, 15 March 2013, St John's Smith Square London.

Passiontide Music & Bach's Passions around the UK

Performances of Bach's Passions will be given throughout the country this Passiontide. Here is just a small sample.

Edinburgh, Queen's Hall, 23 March, 7.00pm St Matthew Passion
Winchester Cathedral 23 March, 7.00pm St John Passion
Tewkesbury Abbey, 24 March, 7.00pm St John Passion
Ely Cathedral, Cambs, 24 March, 7.30pm St John Passion
Leeds, Town Hall, 24 March, 7.00pm, St John Passion
Durham Cathedral, 25 March, 7.00pm St John Passion
Hove, East Sussex, All Saints Church 25 March, 7.00pm, St Matthew Passion
Hereford Cathedral, 27 March, 7.30pm St John Passion
Cambridge, King's College, 27 March, 7.30pm, St John Passion (part of Easter at King's)

London

Westminster Cathedral, London SW1, 21 March, 6.30pm St John Passion
St Paul's Cathedral, EC4, 21 March, 6.30pm St Matthew Passion
Westminster Abbey SW1, 27 March, 6.30pm St Matthew Passion
Barbican Centre, EC2 Good Friday 30 March, 3.00pm St John Passion
St George's Hanover Square W1, Good Friday 30 March, 2.30pm St Matthew Passion (part of London Handel Festival)

Holy Week Festival at St John's Smith Square 26 March - 1 April 2018

This Festival is curated by Nigel Short and features Tenebrae Choir, Aurora Orchestra and a host of artists and choirs in a music-rich week of inspired programmes.. Tickets are on sale from the Box Office www.sjss.org.uk 020 7222 1061

For further details about Bach concerts near you this Passion and Eastertide
www.concert-diary.com or www.bachtrack.com

Note:

The list of Passion performances is not comprehensive.

