

Total performance time: approximately 200 minutes, including a 25-minute interval

This performance is surtitled

Solomon's Knot: St Matthew Passion

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Jonathan Sells artistic director

John La Bouchardière dramatization

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

St Matthew Passion, BWV 244

Text: Christian Friedrich Henrici, 'Picander' (1700–1764),
and St Matthew, 26–7

Part One 60'

INTERVAL

Part Two 105'

Thomas Herford Evangelist

Choir 1

Clare Lloyd-Griffiths soprano

Kate Symonds-Joy alto

Tom Kelly tenor

Jonathan Sells bass / Jesus

Orchestra 1

George Clifford (leader) violin I

Maxim del Mar violin I

Naomi Burrell, Rebecca Harris violin II

Joanne Miller viola

Jonathan Rees cello/gamba

Jan Zahourek double bass

Eva Caballero flute I

Marta Gonçalves flute II

Daniel Lanthier oboe I

Robert de Bree oboe II

Inga Maria Klaucke bassoon

Chad Kelly organ

Choir 2

Zoë Brookshaw soprano

Michal Czerniawski alto

Rory Carver tenor

Alex Ashworth bass

Orchestra 2

Magdalena Loth-Hill, Andrej Kapor violin I

Gabriella Jones, Will McGahon violin II

Jim O'Toole viola

Gavin Kibble cello

Jonny Gee double bass

Lisete Bull flute I

Aimée Taylor flute II

Geoffrey Coates oboe I

Andrés Villalobos Lépiz oboe II

Ester van der Veen contrabassoon

William Whitehead harpsichord

Not staging St Matthew Passion

Widely regarded as one of Western culture's greatest achievements, Bach's *St Matthew Passion* can nonetheless seem difficult to grasp. This is partly a question of scale, but also because his masterpiece presents the familiar story of Christ's suffering through such an unfamiliar lens. St Matthew's devastating account of betrayal, crucifixion and death is narrated verbatim from the gospel. However, Bach and his librettist, Picander, weave into this sequence multiple threads of commentary that are steeped in 18th-century Lutheranism; here, the literary imagery may elude other audiences and congregations, even with preparation and study. Further, Bach sets this tapestry of texts with such a dazzling array of musical invention — from simple recitative and humble hymns to expansive quasi-operatic arias and epic double-chorus-double-orchestra movements — as might leave listeners of any age quite stunned.

The desire to explore such a fascinating and enigmatic composition from a dramatic perspective is unsurprising and, at face value, the piece follows the traditional narrative structure of a well-made play. It establishes the premise that humanity needs salvation, sets up that Jesus must die horribly in exchange, and that the Pharisees want rid of him; Judas's bargain then incites a series of complications and confrontations which lead accordingly to a crisis and resolution. As a narrated story, it is heartrending, vivid and intensely shocking, but *St Matthew Passion* is still no dramatic oratorio, and Bach conceived it according to his own, very different set of rules.

Unexpectedly, perhaps, the biblical characters do not seem to be Bach's primary focus. Their words are always framed as reported speech, and the distribution of roles indicates only a superficial interest in dramatic identity. Writing for two choirs of four solo voices, Bach had his singers regularly switch parts and sometimes take both sides in a conversation. Even Christ's words, to which Bach assigns very special musical treatment, were uttered by a singer who also asked Jesus questions, demanded his crucifixion and sang an aria after his death.

By contrast, Bach devotes the lion's share of his efforts to the non-gospel texts, through which he explores the psychological effects of Christ's suffering on those present. Reacting in the first person, the storytellers undergo a parallel Aristotelian journey of self-discovery, as they come to terms with our collective responsibility for Jesus' humiliation and agonizing death. While chorales focus on personal faith and communal guilt, arias with an endless variety of orchestral accompaniment struggle with all aspects of human frailty, and the great choruses surround the narrative with extended expressions of profound mutual understanding.

This frame to the story is the dramatic heart of *St Matthew Passion* and imbues it with a deep sense of the human condition, as the singers, instrumentalists and, by extension, the public reflect on its complex web of meanings and emotions in the context of their own lives. Liberated from an exclusively religious perspective, our participation in a man's tortuous self-sacrifice through the ecstasy of Bach's music evokes empathy and introspection, as a universal and, perhaps, the greatest tale of suffering and hope ever told.

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Programme note

Some works of art — perhaps only the greatest — seem invested with a special power, an ability to draw you so completely into their aura that you long to be back at their creation, to experience at first hand the world of their birth. Who, feeling the thrill that wells up at the surging opening bars of the *St Matthew Passion*, does not imagine themselves back in a Thomaskirche pew at Vespers on Good Friday, 11 April 1727? Arrayed in the organ loft, two orchestras and choirs, Herr Kantor Bach at their head; a hymn, and then the Passion begins, its opening movement a chorale fantasia of enormous proportions in the form of a dialogue between the Christian believers (Choir 1) and the Daughter of Zion (Choir 2), crowned with the German Agnus Dei, 'O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig', pealing out over the top from a choir of sopranos in *ripieno*. The rhetorical implication of this huge beginning — whose steadily climbing melodic figures above churning bass pedals appear to represent a gathering crowd of the faithful, flooding in from all sides to witness the Passion — is to announce a work of supreme ambition, a work in every way worthy of Christianity's central and most sacred narrative. This, Bach is telling us, is to be an extraordinary work: four or so hours later, the exhausted Leipzig congregation, emerging into the April dusk, would have every reason to agree.

How extraordinary would this epochal first performance have seemed at the time? There is a disappointing dearth of first-hand accounts, but through its monumental size alone — the *Matthew* is twice as large as the earlier *St John Passion* — it must at least have caused comment. In other respects, it was in keeping with recent Leipzig tradition: fully concerted Oratorio Passions, absorbing modern operatic conventions such as the division into recitatives, arias and dramatic choruses, had been introduced in the Thomaskirche by Bach's predecessor Kuhnau in 1721, and Bach presented the first version of his *St John Passion* at his first Good Friday in Leipzig, in 1724. It seems likely that Bach began working on the *Matthew* as early as 1725, and that he took great care and time over its completion; after performances in 1727 and 1729, he did not present it again until 1736, when it attained the form in which we know it today, adding some final revisions to the scoring in 1742. His autograph score, meticulously copied in two different inks, is further testimony to the importance the work held for him.

Small wonder, for on every level the *Matthew* reveals itself as a work of unprecedented complexity and subtlety in the context of Bach's oeuvre, a deliberate *summa* of all of his theological and musical achievements to that point. The lengthy, episodic nature of Matthew's Gospel account (compared with John's compact and dramatic version), beginning with the scenes in Bethany, the Last Supper and Gethsemane, allowed Bach to conceive a work less harshly realistic than the *St John Passion*, more contemplative and concerned with the creation of a dialogue between the unfolding events of the story and the congregation of present-day believers in the Thomaskirche — a work, in fact, that truly acted as both Gospel and Sermon.

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