

Finchley Chamber Choir

Linden Baroque

J S Bach: St John Passion

Programme note, text and translation



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Saturday 7 March, 2020 St James's Church, Piccadilly

Finchley Chamber Choir

Organist: Martyn Noble

Linden Baroque

Leader: Catherine Martin

Conductor: David Lardi

7:30 pm Saturday 7 March, 2020 – St James's Church, Piccadilly

There will be an interval of approximately twenty minutes between Part 1 and Part 2.

This performance is sponsored by a legacy left by Harold Lambert to a family friend who is a choir member. Harold Lambert (1926–2017) was Professor and Clinical Consultant in Microbial diseases at St George's Hospital, London, and a music lover who greatly enjoyed Bach's Passions.

In keeping with Bach's practice and Finchley Chamber Choir tradition, the arias (with the exception of Nos 20 and 24) are sung tonight by members of the choir

Finchley Chamber Choir is affiliated to Making Music and is a registered charity (no. 290104). Linden Baroque is a registered Charity (no. 1014921) and is self-supporting.

Cover photograph by Simon Weir — www.simonweir.com

JS BACH: St John Passion

The tradition of singing the complete Gospel narrative of Jesus' passion and death dates back many centuries before the Bach's time. In the fourth century it was spoken, by the eighth century it was intoned by the priest, and by the thirteenth century a different singer was used for each character. By the seventeenth century solo arias, using devotional but non-Biblical words, were interpolated. Passion settings were found in most countries, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, though elaborate music was forbidden during Holy Week (the week leading up to Easter Sunday) in Italy and France. By the eighteenth century it had become usual to listen to the Gospel of St Matthew on Palm Sunday and that of St John on Good Friday.

Bach's Passion settings come at the climax of the Lutheran tradition that includes congregational chorales (well-known German hymns, originally to well-known melodies). Bach had recently been appointed Cantor at St Thomas's Leipzig: he was the third choice, after Telemann and Graupner, and needed to prove his musical credentials. This was his first significant composition for St Thomas's, though, to his disgust, the first performance on 7th April 1724 was sung at the sister church of St Nicholas. The Lutheran theologian, Christian Gerber, complained about the extent to which instruments were being used on Good Friday and cited an elderly widow who had allegedly complained that 'it's just as if one were present at an opera comedy'. Incidentally, there would have been a sermon lasting over an hour after Part One.

Completely aware that his music was different, Bach was unwilling to compromise. He later admitted to the authorities that his style was 'incomparably harder and more intricate' than other contemporary music. John Eliot Gardiner has described the St John Passion as 'radical...it packs a more dramatic punch than any Passion setting before or since'; Schumann called it 'daring, forceful and poetic'. English National Opera, Peter Sellars and many others have staged the work. The setting is neither greater nor weaker than the later St Matthew Passion: it is simply different.

When so many books and articles have been written, what can one say to do adequate justice to the work? The opening chorus, in G minor, traditionally a key of tragedy, acts as an overture to what is to follow; it is a movement of brooding intensity, with a bass line of repeated notes over which can be heard discord upon discord. The final chorus is in the manner of a slow stately dance and — unusually — musicologists and performers can agree that dance patterns were inspirational to Bach. The role of the choir, other than to sing the chorales, is to represent the 'turba' (mob), sometimes manic ('Kreuzige' — *Crucify*), sometimes pedantic ('Wir haben ein Gesetz' — *We have a law*) but always dramatic and never pleasant.

As the words of the soloists' arias show the whole range of human emotions, so too Bach shows his whole range of compositional skills. It is invidious to pick out individual movements, but one notices the soprano aria ('Ich folge' — *I follow you likewise with joyful steps*) in which the flute part 'follows' the soprano, the dramatic anguish of the tenor aria ('Ach, mein Sinn' — *Ah my soul*), the virtuoso writing for both tenor and the two violas d'amore ('Erwäge' — *Ponder well how his back, every part bloodstained*) and the beautifully sensitive orchestration of 'Betrachte, meine Seel' — *Consider, my soul*). And if proof were needed of Bach's ability to write expressively, we need only listen to the final alto aria ('Es ist vollbracht' — *It is accomplished*).

In his lifetime, Bach's St John Passion received a few performances and was then forgotten; surely today we give him the justice he deserved.

John Winter, February 2020

Finchley Chamber Choir

- SOPRANOS:** Annette Argent, Celia Bangham, Hilary Bates, Judith Clixby, Claudia Conway, Amy Edwards, Jenny Kettleton, Jo King, Barbara Kilpatrick, Elizabeth Moore-Bick, Jane Orr, Jessica Percival, Anthea Sweet
- ALTOS:** Susan Cruddace, Caroline Doig, Linda Foster, Marion Koebner, Sarah McGuire, Patsy Ryz, Adriana Sutters, Vivienne Trenner, Ruth Wacholder
- TENORS:** Michael Dickinson, Gary Jervis, James Lawson, Godfrey Lyne, Tim Sawers
- BASSES:** Ian Anderson, Pierfranco Bini, Richard Cox, Russell Durkin, Humphrey Bangham, Michael Henderson, Rupert Lee, David Lowe, Matthew Pead, Chris Siva-Prakasam, Tony Shelton, Terry Stone

Linden Baroque

- VIOLIN:** Catherine Martin (leader and Viola D'amore), Abel Balazs (and Viola D'amore), Alan Selwyn, Anthony Constantine, Barbara Grant, Carolyn Hall, Christine-Marie Louw, Jocelyn Slocombe, Linda McDonald, Michael Jenner, Wendy Talbot
- VIOLA:** Andrew Spencer, Deborah Miles-Johnson, John Sutherland, Roger Mears
- CELLO:** Christine Draycott (continuo), Helen Brauer, Mary Walton
- BASS and VIOLA DA GAMBA:** Peter Wendland
- OBOE / OBOE DA CACCIA:** Lysander Tennant, Simon Galton
- FLUTE:** Nick Jackman, Richard Austen
- BASSOON:** Mathew Dart