

# *BachBeat*

**Notes from Bach Cantata Choir**

Ralph Nelson, Artistic Director

March 2023 — Vol. 16 No. 5

**2022-23 Season**



## ***St. John Passion***

**Sunday, April 2, 2023**

**2:00 pm Lecture ~ 3:00 pm Concert**

*Johann Sebastian Bach*  
**BWV 245 St. John Passion**

Guest soloists:

Arwen Myers, soprano

Laura Thoreson, alto

Les Green, tenor (Evangelist)

Jacob Herbert, bass

Also featuring:

Kevin Walsh (Jesus); Kyle Ross-Hall (Pilate); Paul Butler (Peter)

Concert Location:

[Rose City Park Presbyterian Church](#)

(NE 44th and Sandy Blvd)

1907 NE 45th Ave Portland OR 97213 (office)

**Tickets are required for this concert.** Doors open at 1:30pm.

[Purchase tickets here](#)

In November 2019 the choir performed the first half of the *St. John Passion*, intending to perform the second half in March 2020. We were just weeks away from that performance when Covid brought everything to a standstill. We look forward to completing this work on Palm Sunday 2023.

### **Guest Lecturer**

For this concert we present musicologist and Bach scholar Dr. Michael Marissen as our guest lecturer. Dr. Marissen's topic will be "Troubling Voices in Bach's Sublime St. John Passion." He is the author of *Lutheranism, anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion* (Oxford, 1998). Michael Marissen is Daniel Underhill Professor Emeritus of Music at Swarthmore College, where he taught from 1989 to 2014.

[Click here for a list of his other publications](#)



Michael Marissen #46 Credit line must read: Photo © Sigrid Estrada

## What is the St. John Passion?

As early as the 4th century the Passion was a part of Christian worship services especially during Holy Week, relating the story of Christ's arrest and crucifixion. It became the custom to hear the words of Matthew on Palm Sunday and the words of John on Good Friday. Bach's predecessors Schütz, Schelle, Knüpfer, and Kuhnau all composed passions according to the styles of their times. Then came Bach, the Baroque Overachiever, with his robust and complex *St. John Passion* (composed in Leipzig for Good Friday, 1724) on a scale not heard before or since.

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In 2019 Artistic Director Ralph Nelson offered his thoughts on the St. John Passion:

In the summer of 2008, I participated in the conducting masterclass under the direction of Helmuth Rilling at the Oregon Bach Festival – and the St. John Passion was the primary focus of our studies. Rilling, one of the greatest conductors of Bach's music, was a master “detective” who enlightened us to all the little “tricks” that are found in the score. Some of these are described below.

Part I deals mainly with three events: the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane; his “trial” before the chief priest at the house of the chief priest; and the denial of Christ by Peter in the garden outside the chief priest’s house.

The opening chorus is a very dramatic work in which the chorus pleads and prays, “Herr” (Lord). But the movement begins with the low strings (the bass punctuating each quarter note – possibly representing the nailing of Christ to the cross) and then “piercing” notes from the oboes and flutes. Later Bach will use these piercing notes again to accompany the great “Crucify” choruses in Part II. In essence, he is foreshadowing the events to come. After the opening chorus, the Evangelist as narrator tells us that Jesus was in the garden and they came to arrest him. Now the chorus changes from commentary to

Part II deals with Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate, the crucifixion at Golgotha, and his burial. Again, the chorus plays various roles: Roman soldiers, angry mobs, high priests, and onlookers. Both the music and the text reflect the mocking of the Roman soldiers as they greet Jesus “Sei gegrüßet, lieber Jüdenkönig” (Greetings, dear king of Jews).

Our resident German professor, William Fischer, writes: Luther would have known full well what “lieber” does to undermine the dignity of “sei gegrüßet.” Moreover, Bach’s use of the minuet form here turns the Roman soldiers into mock-mincing courtiers, and the front vowels of “sei gegrüßet, lieber Jüdenkönig” all in accented syllables, pull the mouth into a cruelly grinning, jaw-jutting sneer: “sooooo niiiiice to seeeee youuuuu, deeeear kiiiiing of the Jewwws.”

The frenzied mob shrieks “Kreuzige!” (Crucify him!) and “Weg, weg!” (Take him away!). Cooler heads put forth legal arguments against this hasty action, and the music becomes more orderly “Wir haben ein Gesetz” (We have an ancient law). The same melody is heard again as the angry crowd retorts “Lässest du diesen los, so bist du des Kaisers Freund nicht!” (If you let this man go, then you are no friend of Caesar), and this is something to be taken seriously.

Nelson continues:



being the actual soldiers.

Throughout Part I, listen especially to how the tenor will skillfully adjust the tempi and dynamics of the recitatives to give greater meaning to the text. Bach carefully chose every note for a reason – and always that reason is to represent and emphasize the text – so please read along in the program!

The arias in this section require a special look. In the aria for soprano “Ich folge dir” (I Follow You) – there are two flutes, but they play the same line. Why? This is because in the previous recitative, the text says, “Simon Peter followed Jesus with another disciple.” The flutes then take us out of the valley and up into the city – and in their line we can see little hills and mountains, and occasionally some little leaps which are the physical steps.

One of the most dramatic events in Part I is the denial by Peter. Peter is asked three times if he knows Jesus – first by a maid, then by the chorus, and finally by another servant. Then Bach has an extended “weeping” recitative for the Evangelist on the text “and he went out and wept bitterly.” This text is not part of the Gospel of John – but Bach has added it from the Gospel of Matthew to add to the dramatic effect.

The tenor then sings a magnificent aria “Ach, mein Sinn” (Oh, My Soul). Part I ends with a chorale; the same chorale tune, with different words, will be used to start Part II.

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In Leipzig, there would have been a sermon after Part I, lasting up to an hour as part of the Good Friday vespers. Part II would begin after the sermon.

Instead of a sermon, we will have a

A couple of interesting moments in the second half occur during the actual crucifixion scene. One of them is after the Roman soldiers have lifted Christ onto the cross. They decide to divide Jesus’ clothes amongst them, but his robe is beautiful, and they don’t want to rip it, so they decide to play a game to see who will have his robe.

Rilling commented to us: “You can hear that this is a dice game (because he uses an Alberti bass in the cello that sound like dice shaking.). There are 4 dice – and you can tell when they hit the ground. The problem is no one wins the game at first – so it goes on for a while – until one of them wins (hint: the soprano has a high “A” four notes before the end of the movement – as if she is saying, ‘Oh, I won!’).”

Then, when Jesus sees his mother, he turns to the disciple John and says, “Behold, your mother.” Bach follows this with a beautiful chorale (one of my favorites), “Er nahm alles wohl in acht” stating that, even in this horrible final hour, Jesus still wanted to be sure his mother was cared for.

The Passion draws to a close with the beautiful chorus “Ruht wohl!” (Sleep well, and rest in God’s safe-keeping) and is followed by the final chorale:

“Ah Lord, when comes that final day,  
may angels bear my soul away to  
Abram's bosom take it;  
let then my body's anguish cease, my  
soul to wait the day, in peace, when  
Thou again awake it.

Lord Jesus Christ, oh hear Thou me,  
Thy name I praise eternally.”

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15-minute intermission.  
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### **Tickets are required for the St. John Passion concert.**

Tickets for this concert are \$30 (all ages). Seating is general admission. Tickets are available online from the choir's website. [Click here to purchase tickets.](#)

(To avoid service fees, you can also purchase tickets directly from choir members.)  
Students may purchase \$10 tickets at the door, if space permits.

### **Parking**

The church's parking lot is very small. Please allow time to find on-street parking. Important: Do not park at Grocery Outlet! Sunday is their busiest day and we want to be good neighbors.

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### **Covid Protocol**

We will observe maximum numbers allowed in the sanctuary and will have an intermission during the concert.

While we highly recommend vaccinations wherever possible, we will **no longer ask for Covid vaccination status** or ID.

For the audience, we **strongly recommend masking** at this concert.

Because singing remains a major risk factor for spreading Covid, the choir will continue to mask.

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### **Season Schedule**

We look forward to presenting the remaining concerts for the 2022-23 season:

#### **Sunday, April 2** (*tickets are required*)

Lecture at 2:00pm; Concert at 3:00pm  
J.S. Bach: *St. John Passion*, Parts 1 & 2

#### **Sunday, June 4 at 2:00pm**

Sara Levy's Musical Salon and her relationship to the Bach family  
Venue TBD.



We regret that livestreaming will not be provided for concerts this season.

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The Bach Cantata Choir's mission is to sing the entire set of cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach over a period of 30 years. The Bach Cantata Choir is a legally organized non-profit corporation under Oregon law, and is a registered 501(c)(3) corporation with the IRS. Donations to the choir are tax-deductible to the extent provided by law and regulation.

The BachBeat newsletter is published cyclically by the Bach Cantata Choir.

Emily Rampton, Writer and Editor

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**Bach Cantata Choir**

3570 NE Mathison Pl.

Portland, OR 97212

Phone: (503) 702-1973

[www.bachcantatachoir.org](http://www.bachcantatachoir.org)

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Bach Cantata Choir | 3570 NE Mathison Pl., Portland, OR 97212

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