



Hemiola

St George's Singers

JS BACH: ARCHITECT OF SOUND

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During Lockdown, St George's Singers were fortunate to have our own Listening Club. Led by Rosemary Broadbent (Alto), it gave us the opportunity to listen to a variety of works, both choral and instrumental, and to consider what made them of interest. Often during our virtual meetings, participants discussed the emotion that is elicited by certain musical phrases, intervals, chords; frequently the group questioned why it made them feel so deeply, at times a purely visceral reaction.

Glenn Gould called Bach the 'greatest architect of sound'. We recognize the *St John Passion* as one of the great works of art for good reason. It has been said that it is 'involving', 'motivating' but it is also challenging in the best possible ways. The more we singers get into the depths of the piece, the more enthusiastic we are, the more we feel swept up in it. Great music is at least as fulfilling for the performers, as it is for the listeners; we have our fingers in it, we experience the mind of Bach and feel every twist and turn of the story. Performing this work is a full-frontal confrontation with our own flaws and tragedies. In the eleventh movement chorale we sing, 'Wer hat dich so geschlagen? ... Ich, ich'; 'Who has done this to you? I have.' Hard words to hear and Bach sets them with a searing intensity. His art in bringing the story to life is breathtaking.

So why does it make us feel so deeply? Music scholars, passionate 'amateur' listeners and scientists have attempted to give answers.

Bernard Chazelle, a computer scientist at Princeton University and eclectic amateur musical blogger, has an original view on what music works in us, especially the music of J.S. Bach. Just as mathematicians talk about discovering rather than inventing great equations, Chase

says Bach set out to 'discover' the musical rules behind the universe. His music is 'sending sound waves, so in our brains, there must be a "reservoir of beauty" which can remain untapped.' Chazelle says, 'But if you can find it with the right spotlight, then you discover these amazing consonances, or dissonances, or stunning narrative inside you ... an enormous gold mine that can be revealed.'

And yet it seems extraordinary to us, with our 21st century mindset, that in the first half of the 18th century, there was little connection between a composer's actual feelings at the moment of composition and the musical work he or she was producing. At that time, the music was not intended as a mirror or a reflection of the artist's own sentiment at the moment of creation.

Johann Sebastian's world was shaped by the theology of Martin Luther, and approximately three quarters of his music was written for the church. Each cantata he created for church services was original; despite the obvious temptation, Bach rarely repeated himself, generating fresh music of extraordinary impact and beauty. It was Bach's faith that drove so much of his work; he frequently began his writing of a church piece with an abbreviated Latin prayer, *soli Deo gloria*; 'to God alone be glory'.

It was only later, when his second son Carl Philipp Emmanuel was composing in a 'sensitive style' (*empfindsamer Stil*) that an important revolution in the musical world took place. From then on, a musician could not only express emotions and passions, but he or she had to feel these emotions in order to express them properly. For the first time, a clear and direct emotional channel was linking the composer and/or performer to the listener, without God or a monarch being necessarily involved in the process.

But until this point, although we can hear

'If a Jazz Quartet turned to the Baroque master for inspiration, it's that, alone among his peers, Bach "swings." Yet his singularity, I believe, lies elsewhere. ...

'... It is, indeed, the gift of melody that stands Bach apart from the rest. Schubert had it; Bizet had it; Monk had it; Bono not so much. How this works is a mystery. What it is not, is that a counterpoint is only as good as its melodic parts. That's why Bach is such a thrill and Pachelbel is not.'

Bernard Chazelle, Eugene Higgins Professor of Computer Science at Princeton University



ST GEORGE'S SINGERS

PRESIDENT:

Marcus Farnsworth MA ARAM

VICE PRESIDENTS:

Sasha Johnson Manning
Stephen Threfall
Stephen Williams

MUSICAL DIRECTOR:

Neil Taylor

ACCOMPANIST:

Peter Durrant

Registered Charity no 508686

Member of Making Music, the National Federation of Music Societies

www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

Saturday 26 March 2022

Royal Northern College of Music
124, Oxford Road,
Manchester, M13 9RD

Johann Sebastian Bach
St John Passion

St George's Singers
Baroque in the North

Conductor **Neil Taylor**

Evangelist **Ruarri Bowen**
Soprano **Lizzy Humphries**
Contralto **Amy Holyland**
Tenor **Robin Morton**
Bass **Matthew Brook**
Bass **Terence Ayebare**

Tickets:

£16, £10 students / children

Tel : 01663 764012

Email: tickets@st-georges-singers.org.uk

Online: www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

NB Mini Bus transport is available
from Macclesfield / Poynton/Hazel
Grove to RNCM

Listening to Classical Music

In our next edition of *Hemiola*, you can find out more about the choral and instrumental work studied by our Listening Club.

In the classical music world, music that is written specifically with the intention of conjuring up images is often called 'programme music'.

One of the most famous examples of this would be Respighi's *The Pines of Rome*, where the composer incorporates bird sounds to help the listener feel that they are in a forest.



JS BACH AND *ST JOHN PASSION*



The Passion according to St John, composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, is one of the seminal works of the entire choral repertoire and a milestone in the history of music. The Passion received its first performance on Good Friday 1724, a year after Bach's appointment as Kantor (Director of Music) of St Thomas's Church, Leipzig.

Bach was born on 21st March 1685, into a great family of musicians, stretching back several generations. His father, also Johann, worked as the town musician in Eisenach. At the age of seven, he went to school where he received religious instruction and studied Latin and other subjects. By the time he turned 10, both of Bach's parents had died. He was taken in by his elder brother, Johann Christoph, a church organist, where he stayed until he was 15 years old.

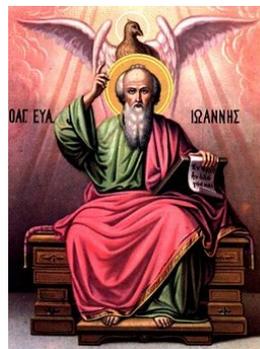
Johann had a beautiful soprano singing voice which helped his application to a school in Lüneburg. However, after his voice

changed, he switched to playing violin and harpsichord.

When he was 18 years old, he landed his first job as a musician, serving as a violinist and occasional organist at the court of Duke Johann Ernst in Weimar.

Bach's appointment as Kantor in Leipzig involved the composition of liturgical cantatas for every Sunday of the Church's year. His musical interpretations of the Bible using choruses, arias and recitatives were referred to as his 'Passions'. When Bach composed more instrumental music, (dance suites, concertos and sonatas) these works still reflected his deep commitment to his faith.

Nowadays, *St John Passion* is most often performed as a concert. However, in the original context of the Lutheran Good Friday liturgy, a sermon of considerable length, perhaps several hours, would have been delivered in between the two main parts.



Bach takes as his text chapters 18 and 19 of the Gospel of St John, using the translation

from the Lutheran Bible of 1534. However, two moments in Bach's setting are drawn from the Gospel according to St Matthew: the weeping of St Peter after his denial, and the tearing of the veil of the Temple.

The story is narrated by the Evangelist in sections of recitative, where the text is sung in near-speech rhythms, accompanied by solo cello and organ

Interspersed between the Gospel narrative, arias are sung by soloists; the tenor Evangelist, a bass Christus and a few other minor characters. These arias are settings of poetry that meditate on the action just heard in the story.

As with Bach's *St Matthew Passion* written three years later, the work is structured around chorales; hymns, whose melodies and words would have been familiar to Bach's contemporaries. Mirroring the opening movement, the work approaches its conclusion with an extended valedictory lullaby *Ruht wohl* (rest well), one of the most poignant choruses ever written. The closing chorale is a triumphant affirmation of faith and trust in the Resurrection.

Despite the harrowing events so graphically depicted in Bach's intense music, the overriding message of *St John Passion* is one of compassion and hope, so much needed at this present time.

JS BACH: ARCHITECT OF SOUND

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motions and passion in Baroque music, they are not representative of the emotions felt by the composer at the time of composition. There was a mental disconnection that came with the purpose of music in society, which was either to entertain, glorify, enlighten or teach and sometimes a combination. All these functions naturally required the capacity to express a wide range of emotions and passions; however, the listener was not interested in the artist's own.

The utter melancholy of *O grosse Lieb* or the exquisite comfort of *Ruht wohl* do not reflect Bach's own feelings at the moment of his composition; they are triggered by the function of his music. His capacity to express these emotions must have been rooted in his own human experience, but they are not a reflection of his own state of mind at a specific moment. Our 21st century minds can intellectually understand the concept of emotional distance between creator and creation, but our souls and heart can struggle to believe it.

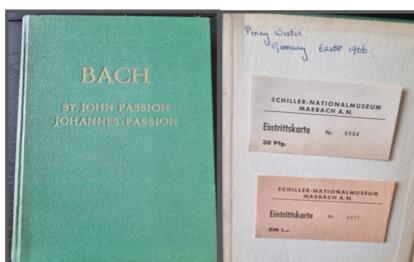
FROM THE ASHES

During the Lockdown months, one of our members experienced the trauma of a house fire. Penny Anson's house caught fire in the middle of the night; fortunately she was able to get out, but most of her possessions were destroyed. This included a vast number of her books and music.

When we started to rehearse *St John's Passion*, Penny brought into rehearsal a very poignant survivor of the fire. This was a copy of Bach's work that she had kept safe for over 50 years. The copy was unblemished and contained two concert tickets.

Back in 1966, Penny was 19 years old and visiting Germany. Penny continues the story.

'I was staying with my penfriend and family who lived in in Stuttgart. The family home was in Nussdorf, a wonderful Bavarian village in



Baden Baden; the name means 'nut village'. My penfriend's parents went out of their way to encourage me with music. They also had a glorious afternoon ritual of feeding me with Kaffee (coffee) and Kuchen (cakes, but no ordinary cakes!). They spoke very little English and were constantly telling me that I should not try to copy their Bavarian pronunciation.

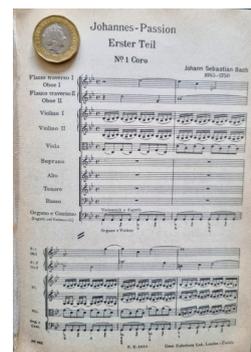
'My bedroom was directly above the cow's quarters and her father was the local electrical retailer - such contrasts! I loved it. We went to her cousin's house for baths - there was neither shower nor bath in the house.

'I cannot remember exactly where the concert was held, but I do remember being thrilled with the performance; I think I had recently sung it in Wolverhampton. Quite a change!'

GREAT THINGS IN SMALL PACKAGES

The copy of *St John Passion* that survived the fire was a 'pocket' version, with printed notes and words so small it must have been very difficult to decipher them, especially those extremely fast choruses!

In this picture, a current pound coin illustrates the task that faced the singers back in 1966!



SINGING DAY 2022

SYMPHONY OF PSALMS



Stravinsky aged 21 in 1903

© Wikipedia

The *Symphony of Psalms* was a commission to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1930. The orchestra wanted something symphonic, and Stravinsky's publisher wanted something popular. Stravinsky gave them both.

'I took the word, not in the publisher's meaning of 'adapting to the understanding of the people', but in the sense of 'something universally admired,' he said.

Tom Service, writing in *The Guardian*, considers that the secret of the work's symphonism is its relationship between chorus and orchestra. Stravinsky composed for them so that 'the two elements are on equal footing, neither outweighing the other. Service considers that the 'new sounds' represent a sincere expression of Stravinsky's unique approach to the psalms, the symphony and

even his observant Orthodox faith.

According to Service, the opening E minor chord of the Symphony, played by an orchestra of two pianos, harp, woodwind, brass and low strings, 'crystallises the sharp directness of its soundworldthe choir ... takes the place of violins and violas'.

St George's Singers' accompanist, Pete Durrant, will be representing the massed ranks of the mixed chorus and instrumentalist with a reduction of this three movement work for voice and piano.

Edward Woodall Naylor was organist of Emmanuel College, Cambridge when he wrote the sumptuous *Vox Dicentis*, in 1911, for the choir of King's College, Cambridge. Apart from this well-known anthem and a few canticle settings, very little of his music is known or in the repertoire of most choirs.

Born in 1867, he won a choral scholarship to Emmanuel where he gained a BA in 1887. After studying at the Royal College of Music, he then spent eight years as organist in London.

Naylor returned to Cambridge to take up the position in Emmanuel College, where he remained until his death in 1934. His most important compositions were for voices; his composition *The Angelus* won the Ricordi prize for an English opera.

Igor's second son, Soulima Stravinsky, studied theory and composition with Nadia Boulanger. Ten years after his father had moved to the USA, Soulima made his New York debut with the CBS Symphony Orchestra. It was Soulima who first wrote a reduction for piano and voice of his father's *Symphony of Psalms* / *Symphonie de Psaumes*.

We are so pleased that we have been able to rearrange our postponed Singing Day, to give the opportunity to perform this extraordinary piece. More details of the arrangements can be found on our website.

St George's Singers

SINGING DAY

Saturday 23 April

9:30am - 17:15pm

17:30 Concert

Symphony of Psalms

Igor Stravinsky

Vox dicentis: Clama

Edward Naylor

If you would like to register for our Singing Day, you can download a [registration form via this link](#).

Further details [from our website](#)

St George's Singers

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www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

Hemiola is sent to all Friends of St George's Singers, and a digital version goes to those on our Mailing List. To receive a regular copy, complete the Mailing List registration on the website, or contact the Publicity Officer.



St George's Singers was formed in 1956 by Rev Eric Chapman and Geoffrey Verney, organist and choirmaster of St George's Church, Poynton in Cheshire, where the Choir still rehearses every Tuesday night. Geoffrey's dream was to build a community choir, capable of performing major choral works to a high standard and which would attract singers and audiences from neighbouring towns. Geoffrey died in 1964, but his legacy was nurtured by his successors Duncan Eyre, Ray Lomax and Stephen Williams, and is continued by our present Musical Director, Neil Taylor.

St George's Singers is recognised as one of the leading and most innovative choirs in the North West of England, performing an astonishingly varied repertoire, and with around 100 members drawn from an area far beyond the community of Poynton. We present at least four major concerts a year, in venues including The Bridgewater Hall, Gorton Monastery, The Stoller Hall, Manchester Cathedral and Royal Northern College of Music, hold annual Singing Days, and tour regularly in the UK and abroad.

St George's Singers continues to explore and expand the boundaries of choral music, and communicating the sheer enjoyment of singing together. Entry to the Choir is via audition, and new members are welcome to come along to rehearsals at any time.

ST GEORGE'S CONCERT DIARY

Saturday 23 April 2022

Singing Day

Igor Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms*,

St George's Church, Poynton

Saturday 18 June and

Sunday 26 June 2022

William Walton *Belshazzar's Feast*

Vaughan Williams *Five Mystical*

Songs

Grace Williams *Penillion*

Charles Ives *The Unanswered*

Question

Huddersfield Town Hall (18 June)

and Gorton Monastery (26 June)

Ticket Hotline: 01663 764012

tickets@st-georges-singers.org.uk

MANCHESTER SINGS!

Die Schöpfung 'The Creation'

(Franz) Joseph Haydn

Macclesfield Singers & Symphony Orchestra (KEMS)

St Michael and All Angels

26 March 2022 19:30

Under the baton of Ian Chesworth, this performance in German will feature three singers from the RNCM: Pippa Goss (soprano) Cillian Donaghy (tenor) and Patrick Osborne (bass).

Tickets

Adult £12.00 Under 18 £2.50 available from KEMS website

St Matthew Passion

J S Bach

William Byrd Singers

The Stoller Hall, Manchester,

2 April 2022 19:00

The William Byrd singers will form two choirs alongside six internationally acclaimed soloists and period instruments of the 18th Century Sinfonia to create an authentic performance. Keith Orrell, the Musical Director of the choir, will direct the singers and musicians from the harpsichord.

Tickets £24.50 available from Stoller Hall online or 0333 130 0967

NB No tickets 'at the door'.

Our Wonderful World!

Salford Choral Society

Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester

23 April 2022 19:30

The choral society and Piccadilly Symphony Orchestra invite you to join them for an evening of uplifting music celebrating the wonder of nature, including the world premiere of *The Gardener* by young composer Lucy Armstrong and lyricist Rebecca Hurst. Full details of the concert from Salford Choral Society.

Tickets £19 (Concessions £16) available from

RNCM Booking Office : 0161 907 5555 or their website.