

**Trinity Cathedral to present Bach's
St. John Passion on Good Friday, April 3**



by Daniel Hathaway

Imagine sitting in Leipzig's St. Nicholas Church on the afternoon of Good Friday, 1724 and hearing the stirring opening chorus of Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. John Passion* at its debut performance. You can re-imagine that experience this Friday — Good Friday, April 3 at 7:30 at Trinity Cathedral, when Todd Wilson will lead the Trinity Consort of 16-some singers, soloists, the Trinity Cathedral Choir, and an ensemble of period instruments in the first of Bach's two extant settings of the story of the arrest, suffering and execution of Jesus.

"It's a signal piece in his whole output," Wilson said in a telephone conversation. "It's drama, its pacing, its depth of feeling. It's extra-emblematic of everything Bach stood for, especially at that time in his life."

At that time in his musical life, Bach had just completed his first year as Cantor in the conservative, pietistic city of Leipzig, serving a council and congregation who had wanted to hire either George Philipp Telemann or Christoph Graupner after the death of Johann Kuhnau (both took advantage of the situation to wangle raises at their current posts and politely declined the invitation from Leipzig.) Unlike Leipzig's first and second choices, Bach came with only limited and long-in-the-past experience in writing church music.

What a chain of surprises he must have delivered during his first year on the job, when he set himself the task of writing a new cantata every week. Add to that the fact that Leipzig

didn't care for what they called "operatic" church music, and the *St. John* must have been breaking news, to say the least. Leipzig had allowed sung settings of the passion story on Good Friday, but they were simple works of limited scope. Bach's first attempt at the form resulted in a long, dramatic journey whose choruses, arias and chorales contained a vast range of emotion.

Wilson will assign the opening and closing choruses and the chorales to the Trinity Cathedral Choir. The Trinity Consort will take on the more complicated crowd scenes. Cory Shotwell will sing the role of the Evangelist, and Anthony Gault the role of Jesus. Aria soloists will include local sopranos Margaret Carpenter and Madeline Apple Healey, and countertenors Jay White and John McElliott. Cincinnati-based singers Sean Mlynek, tenor, and Jonathan Cooper, bass, will be special guests. Among the featured instrumentalists will be flutists Kathie Stewart and Sarah Lynn, oboists Sian Ricketts and Luke Conklin, cellist René Schiffer and viola da gambist David Ellis.

Though Bach set himself the task of writing a second such work, the *St. Matthew Passion*, a few years later, he came back to the *St. John Passion* on several occasions, swapping out choruses and arias to adapt it to varying performance situations. Though fragments of a *Luke-Passion* can be discovered, repurposed in other pieces, the two passions that have survived intact are remarkable musical monuments, very different, but each cherishable for its own special qualities. The *Matthew* setting is grand and noble, the *John* compact and dramatic — and if we may dare say so, operatic in the best sense of the word.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 2, 2015.

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