



## ACT 1: CHURCH MUSIC IN PRAISE OF GOD

No sooner had Bach arrived in Leipzig than he threw himself wholeheartedly into composing church music. In a mere few years, he managed to create up to five annual cycles of church cantatas, about 60 compositions per year. In addition, he wrote such works as the Magnificat, the Ascension Oratorio, the St John Passion and the St Matthew Passion.

A devout Protestant, Bach crafted expressive, artistic settings for biblical texts and chorales. He attributed great importance to these sacred cornerstones of vocal music. This is demonstrated by his meticulous fair copy of the St Matthew Passion, in which he highlighted words from the Bible and chorales in red ink. His particular way of setting four-part chorales made them a genre in their own right, now simply known as ‘Bach chorales’. For arias and recitatives based on free poetry, he invented an astonishing number of individual and always surprising solutions.

Bach’s inventiveness and originality were already recognized by his contemporaries, and to this day, the fascinating effect of his compositions remains unbroken. His church cantatas, oratorios and passions possess a universal character and move people from all backgrounds and walks of life. The first act of this tricentennial exhibition focuses on Bach’s sacred vocal music.

# COMPOSING IN FAITH

Johann Sebastian Bach, a devout Protestant, shared Martin Luther's view of music. To Luther, music was second only to the Word of God in its ability to influence people's hearts and deepen their faith. Bach was similarly devoted to music, as evidenced by the note he wrote in the margin of his Bible: "In devotional music, God is always present with His grace."

Bach's meticulous attention to detail in every composition was rooted in his faith. Whether he was writing a humble organ chorale or an ambitious work like the St Matthew Passion, Bach's extraordinary artistry was always evident. Despite his unwavering devotion, his faith never limited his artistic expression. His musical language was always characterized by a thirst for knowledge, a willingness to embrace new ideas, and an exceptional ability to blend disparate elements into a harmonious whole.

## **Bible translated by Luther and owned by Bach**

Published by Abraham Calov | Volume 1, Wittenberg 1681-82 | Facsimile | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Numerous handwritten entries in Bach's Bible bear witness to his intensive study of the text. Of particular interest are his remarks on church music. According to Bach, 1 Chronicles 25 provides "The true foundation of all church music pleasing to God," while he regarded 1 Chronicles 28 as "Wonderful evidence that music, in particular, was commanded by the Holy Ghost as part of worship."

## **Bible translated by Luther and owned by Bach**

with numerous copperplate engravings by Matthäus Merian the Elder | Bach's inscription of ownership dated 1744 | Frankfurt, 1704 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, C. Haslinger Collection

It wasn't until 2010 that the ownership history of this Bible was traced back to Johann Sebastian Bach. The discovery was made when a US dealer offered the Bible for sale online, noting an inscription of ownership that he was unable to decipher. This piqued the interest of a German collector, who recognized the monogram as belonging to Bach himself.

## **Heinrich Müller: Evangelical mirror of the heart with supplementary sermons on the passion**

Ratzeburg 1697 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

The Passion sermons by theologian Heinrich Müller served as a crucial foundation for the freely composed texts in the St Matthew Passion. It's possible that Bach shared these sermons with his librettist Picander or even lent him a copy. Picander drew on the sermons for various elements of the composition, including the text for the bass aria 'Am Abend da es kühle war' ('At eventide, when it was cool').

## **Libretto of the St Matthew Passion, BWV 244**

in: Christian Friedrich Henrici (Picander), Serious-humorous and satirical poems, volume 2 | Leipzig 1729 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Lyrical reflections gave shape to the St Matthew Passion, with Bach's librettist Henrici (also known as Picander) contributing seventeen poems. These poems break up the biblical story and offer commentary on individual scenes throughout. Bach set the mostly two-part poems to music as choruses, *accompanato* recitatives (recitatives accompanied by the orchestra) and arias.

## **Performance of the St Matthew Passion 1736**

Under Bach's direction, both choirs as well as both orchestras performed on the large west gallery of St Thomas's Church. On the opposite east wall, high above the choir arch, there was a small swallow's nest organ until 1740. During a performance in 1736, Bach positioned the 'cantus firmus sopranos' there, resulting in a sound that reverberated throughout the church from both sides and travelled over a distance of more than 30 metres.

# MASTERPIECES OF THE ART OF THE CANTATA

Bach's cantatas are a testament to his exceptional compositional prowess, as he skilfully crafted an endless array of musical ideas and sparked a vibrant display of emotional expression.

When Bach took up his post in Leipzig, he had the grand vision of performing only his own works. During his inaugural year, he introduced a wide variety of musical styles incorporating unfamiliar instruments and tonal combinations. Where appropriate, he drew on pieces from his earlier periods in Weimar and Köthen, cleverly adapting them to suit the new context.

In his second year, Bach embarked on his most ambitious project to date: a cantata cycle centred rooted in a cohesive musical and poetic concept. For each Sunday and religious holiday, he devised a cantata based on a church hymn. Typically, Bach left the first and last verses of the hymn unaltered, while transforming the inner stanzas into arias and recitatives. Each cantata typically began with an elaborate chorale arrangement and concluded with a four-part chorale movement.

The Leipzig chorale cantata cycle was unparalleled in its consistency, as Bach meticulously executed an objective he had outlined back in 1708 in a letter to the town council of Mühlhausen – to carry out the “ultimate goal, namely a well-regulated church music to the Glory of God and in conformance with your [the parishioners’] wishes.”

## **Cantata: Ärgre dich, o Seele, nicht ('Vex thyself, O spirit, not'), BWV 186**

First performed on 11 July 1723 | Continuo part for a revival c. 1746/49 | Unknown copyist |  
Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Just six weeks into his new post, Bach performed this impressive cantata for four soloists, a four-part choir, two oboes, a taille (tenor oboe), strings, and basso continuo with bassoon. Expressive arias follow recitatives that lead into extended vocal passages. The closing chorales were seamlessly woven into a stirring instrumental movement.

## **Cantata: Höchsterwünschtes Freudenfest ('O most lovely feast of joy'), BWV 194.2**

First performed at the consecration of the organ in Störmthal on 2 November 1723 | Score copyist: Johann Tobias Krebs, pre-1750 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from St Lawrence's Lutheran Parish of Crammitchau

In autumn 1723, Bach visited Störmthal, a town near Leipzig, to inspect its new organ. To mark the organ's consecration, he composed this diverse cantata in the French style. It features a lively opening chorus in the form of a three-part overture, along with other dance-like movements reminiscent of a suite. Bach soon revisited this composition in June 1724, using it to conclude his first cantata cycle.

## **Cantata: O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort ('Eternity, thou thundrous word'), BWV 20**

First performed on 11 June 1724 | Autographe Partitur | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

This composition opened Bach's unprecedented chorale cantata cycle. The stately opening chorus, set as a three-part French overture, serves as a grand entrance to the cycle. Throughout the recitatives and arias, Bach employed various musical figures and tone-painting techniques to convey the emotional depth of words such as pain, agony, hell, and torment. Shown here is the dance-like bass aria 'Gott ist gerecht in seinen Werken' ('God is just in his works') accompanied by three oboes.

## **Cantata: Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern ('How beauteous beams the morning star'), BWV 1**

First performed on 25 March 1725 | Soprano part | Copyist: Johann Andreas Kuhnau | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from St Thomas's Boys Choir

Bach's cantata for the Feast of the Annunciation is a stunning masterpiece of innovation and beauty. In the opening chorus, three pairs of solo instruments — two horns, two oboes da caccia and two violins — engage in a lively musical competition. Throughout this mesmerizing auditory panorama, the resplendent violins evoke the brilliance of the morning star — a symbol of Jesus.

# BACH CHORALES

Chorales play a prominent role in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, serving as independent movements in his sacred vocal pieces, integrated into concertante choral movements and arias, and performed as organ chorales, basso continuo songs, or wedding music. His expressive four-part chorale settings are so well known that they're simply referred to as 'Bach chorales'.

Nearly 400 Bach chorales have survived, each one a masterpiece. Bach always began his composition lessons with chorale exercises. Copies of Bach's chorales already circulated during his lifetime — and after his death, they contributed significantly to preserving the memory of his vocal compositions. In the 1760s, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach published 200 of his father's four-part chorales. They formed the basis for the first complete edition of Bach chorales published by Breitkopf in Leipzig from 1784 to 1787.

But what makes Bach's chorales so special? Bach invented exceptionally varied harmonies to accompany each chorale's melody. All the parts are extremely dynamic and contain unexpected twists and turns. The result is a naturally flowing arrangement which is also a profound interpretation of the text.

## Johann Sebastian Bach: Four-part chorales

Copyist: Johann Ludwig Dietel | c. 1735 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from Leipziger Städtischen Bibliotheken / Musikbibliothek Peters

This copy of 149 settings is the earliest anthology of Bach chorales. Johann Ludwig Dietel (1713–1773) attended St Thomas's School from 1727 to 1735 and was one of Bach's best choristers. He often acted as a copyist for both Bach and Carl Gotthelf Gerlach, the cantor of Leipzig Neue Kirche ('New Church'). Who commissioned Dietel to compile this collection of chorales is unknown.

## Johann Sebastian Bach: Four-part chorales, part I

First edition with a foreword by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach | Published by Verlag Birnstiel Berlin and Leipzig, 1765 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

This volume was followed in 1769 by a second part containing another 100 chorales. The four vocal parts are divided between two staves for keyboard instruments (right hand: upper voices, left hand: bass voice). In the foreword,

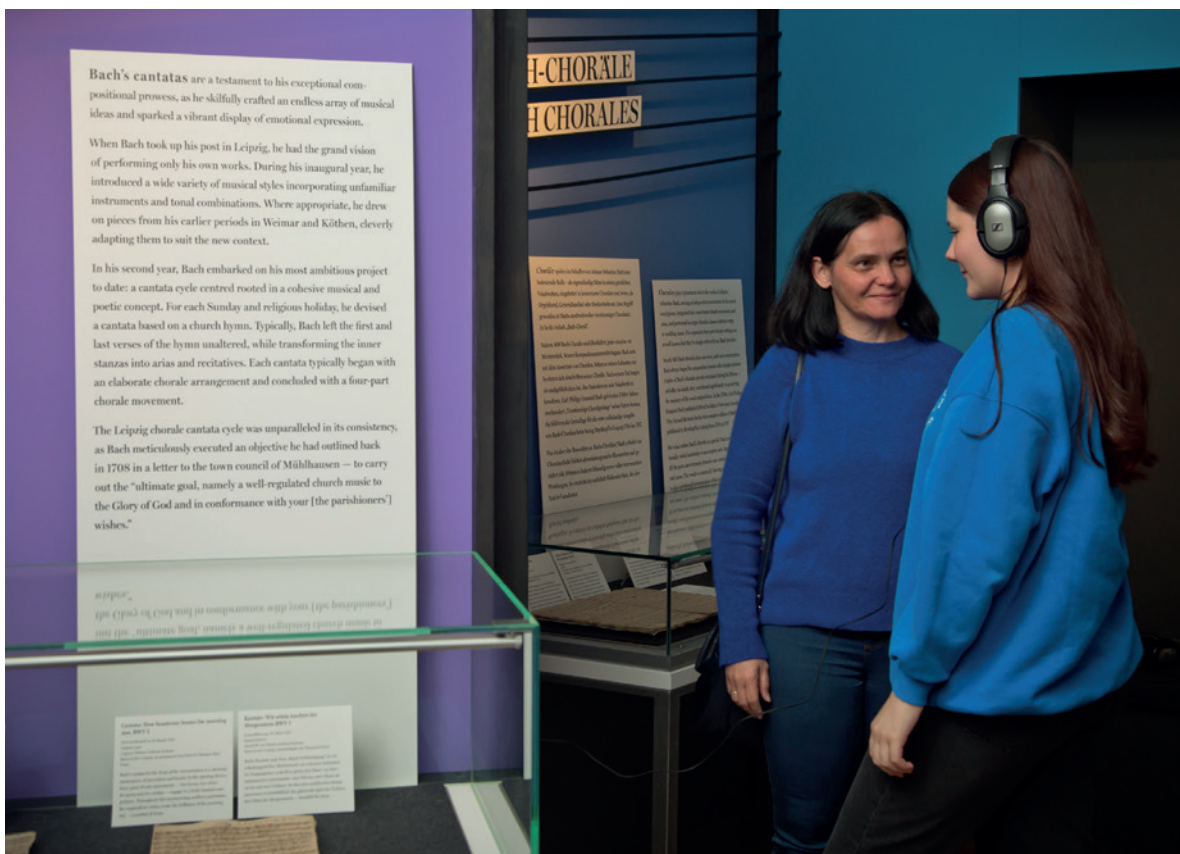


Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel praises "the very special arrangement of the harmony and the natural flowing of the middle voices and the bass, which exquisitely distinguishes these chorales [from others]."

## Johann Sebastian Bach: Four-part chorales, parts I-IV

First edition with a foreword by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach | Published by Verlag Breitkopf | Leipzig, 1784–87 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

The first complete edition contains 371 chorales in keyboard notation and opens with Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's preface from 1765. It later turned out that not all the chorales had been composed by Bach, some even having been written by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Nevertheless, this anthology meant that a substantial part of Bach's church music oeuvre wasn't simply forgotten.



# MUSIC OF IDEAS

The *St Matthew Passion* is regarded as one of the greatest works of art known to mankind. Yet more than a century passed before this masterpiece appeared in print and achieved wide recognition. The expertise of professionals was required to present Bach's pioneering music to middle-class audiences and make it better known.

For a long time, the *St Matthew Passion* was considered impossible to perform. In 1811, the Sing-Akademie (a musical society in Berlin) began presenting individual movements to hand-picked audiences like archaeological excavations under its director Carl Friedrich Zelter. Against Zelter's advice, his pupil Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy tackled a revival of the entire piece. In his view, the *St Matthew Passion* was 'music of ideas' of sublime grandeur, and he adapted it to the ideals of the Romantic period.

On 11 March 1829 — a hundred years after the *St Matthew Passion* had been written — Mendelssohn Bartholdy performed it with a 158-strong choir in Berlin. The audience was enthralled and so were the critics. Performances soon followed in several German cities by local choral societies. Mendelssohn Bartholdy's visionary feat paved the way for the Bach renaissance in the 19th century.

## **Final chorus of the *St Matthew Passion*: Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder ('Here at thy grave sit we all weeping')**

Soprano part from Chorus I | Copyist: Holstein | Berlin, c. 1770 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

This recently discovered manuscript sheds new light on the reception of Bach's music. As early as 1770, a copyist wrote out the parts for the final chorus (sung by two choirs) of the *St Matthew Passion*, probably for a private concert by the Musikübende Gesellschaft in Berlin. It seems that at least part of the oratorio was performed just 20 years after Bach's death!

## **First printed edition of the *St Matthew Passion***

Alto part from Chorus I | Open at the start of Part Two | Published by Verlag Schlesinger, Berlin, c. 1831 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

The *St Matthew Passion* was first performed by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (aged 20) with the Sing-Akademie on 11 March 1829 in Berlin. It appeared in print shortly afterwards. Performances followed in Frankfurt (1829),



Breslau (now Wrocław, 1830), Stettin (Szczecin, 1831), Königsberg (Kaliningrad, 1832), Kassel (1832), Dresden (1833) and Halle (1836).

## Leipzig revival of the St Matthew Passion by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

Soprano part from Chorus II | Leipzig, 1841 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

On 4 April 1841, the first revival of the St Matthew Passion in Leipzig took place at St Thomas's Church. The Gewandhaus Orchestra and an additional choir were conducted by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, the Gewandhaus director.

The soloists were the opera singers August Kindermann (bass-baritone, Christ) and Carl Maria Schmidt (tenor, the Evangelist), alto Henriette Büнау, née Grabau (later a singing teacher at Leipzig Conservatory), and the opera and recital singer Livia Frege (soprano).

### Music to the exhibition on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/72BluaFOLKLpMGHLFherMF?si=93396020dc4943aa>

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Written by Henrike Rucker and Kerstin Wiese | Exhibition designed by Leila Tabassomi and Jens Volz | Photos by Gert Mothes