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PRESS RELEASE

300 Years of St John Passion Performed by Bach in Leipzig

(28 March 2024) This year marks the 300th anniversary of the first performance in Leipzig of Johann Sebastian Bach's St John Passion, a monumental work first performed under Bach's direction at St Nicholas Church on Good Friday, 1724. During the Good Friday service, Bach performed his Passio secundum Johannem with the Thomanerchor (St Thomas Boys Choir), one of the oldest boys' choirs in the world stretching with a history spanning more than 800 years. The St John Passion is a pivotal work in Bach's oeuvre, interweaving the Gospel of John's account of the Crucifixion with chorales and freely composed texts. This earliest known Passion by Bach demonstrates his profound musical and theological insight.

In 2024, the Thomanerchor in collaboration with the Gewandhausorchester will commemorate this historic event with performances at both St Thomas and St Nicholas Church. Under the direction of Thomaskantor Andreas Reize the first version of St John Passion, dating from 1724, will be performed on Maundy Thursday (28 March 2024) in St Thomas Church and on Good Friday (29 March 2024) in St Nicholas Church.

St John Passion at 2024 Leipzig Bachfest "CHORal TOTAL"

For the 2024 Leipzig Bachfest, themed "CHORal TOTAL," a special focus on the St John Passion highlights its enduring significance and versatility. Prof. Dr. Michael Maul, Artistic Director of the Leipzig Bachfest, notes, "You could say we'll be rolling out the red carpet for it, because we'll be demonstrating its versatility and timelessness in three different formats. First a historically informed one, performed by the Thomanerchor with the same musical forces as at Bach's time and played on the great Bach organ in St Thomas Church. Then a staged performance in St Peter's Church, presented by the Bonn-based ensemble Vox Bona, who gave us an overwhelming interpretation of the St Matthew Passion back in 2019. Following that, an open-air performance of the St John Passion on the BachStage on the opening day of the festival."

- [No 4 BachStage – St John Passion barrier-free | Marketplace, Bachfest Leipzig](#)
- [No 102 St John Passion BWV 245.1 | St Thomas Church, Bachfest Leipzig](#)
- [No 142 Open up the heavens for me! – BWV 245 | St Peters Church, Bachfest Leipzig](#)

"We aim literally to overcome all barriers with the open-air »Johannes-Passion barrierefrei«, a barrier-free St John Passion performed and simultaneously signed by Sing & Sign – with, we hope, thousands of people in the audience or following the livestream all over the world joining in with the chorales."

The Leipzig Bachfest is one of the most important international music festivals and will take place from 7 to 16 June 2024 entitled "CHORal TOTAL" with more than 150 events. It celebrates two anniversaries: 500 years of Luther chorales and 300 years of Johann Sebastian Bach's cycle of chorale cantatas. Alongside leading international interpreters and ensembles, 30 Bach choirs from all over the world have been invited to perform this cantata cycle for the first time at the 2024 Leipzig Bachfest.

Tickets for the 2024 Leipzig Bachfest are available at <https://www.bachfestleipzig.de/en/bachfest/2024> . Until 1 April 2024, the BACH Friday Deal offers a 30% online discount with the "Bach30" code.

Good Friday Concerts – Origins of the Traditional Passion Performances

When J. S. Bach premiered his St John Passion with the Thomanerchor in Leipzig's St Nicholas Church on Good Friday, 7 April 1724, the Gewandhausorchester did not yet exist. However, some of the city's pipers and violinists who were among the founding members of the Gewandhausorchester in 1743 took part. The fact that the Gewandhausorchester and the Thomanerchor Leipzig now perform one of Bach's two Passions in St Thomas Church every year during Holy Week can be tracked back to the so-called Good Friday concerts. The first documented Good Friday concert was conducted by Gewandhauskapellmeister Christian August Poblentz in 1825. These sacred concerts have been held regularly ever since. Initially in the University Church of St Pauli, and from 1854 mainly in St Thomas Church.

From 1844 onwards, the proceeds of the Good Friday concert were donated to the Gewandhaus Orchestra's widows' fund, which is why from then on it was known as the "Good Friday concerts of the Gewandhausorchester". Also in 1844, Moritz Hauptmann conducted the St John Passion for the first time since J. S. Bach. However, neither the St Matthew Passion nor the St John Passion made it onto the programme of the Good Friday concerts. This did not change until 1852, when the St Matthew Passion was performed for the first time at the Good Friday concert. From 1856, it was regularly included in the Good Friday concerts of the Gewandhausorchester. In 1918, there was a change of conductor and the respective Thomaskantor conducted the Good Friday concerts of the Gewandhausorchester from then on. At that time, Karl Straube was the Thomaskantor, who reduced the previously mixed choir to the participation of the Thomanerchor and Bach-Verein (Bach Association).

BBC Documentary on St John Passion and Film Tip on Bach's Legacy

To mark the 300th anniversary of the first performance of Bach's St John Passion, the renowned BBC documentary film team, led by the well-known British choirmaster and TV presenter Gareth Malone, visited the rehearsals of the Bach Choir at St Nicholas Church in Leipzig. The insights gained in January 2024 will be presented in a two-part BBC documentary celebrating Bach's life and the 300th anniversary of his St John Passion. The documentary further explores Bach's impact, connecting his music to a broader audience, with extensive coverage of the Leipzig Bach Museum and insights from the Director of Leipzig Bach Archive Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Peter Wollny on the classification and significance of the work. The British documentary will be available to viewers on the BBC's online platform iPlayer. It will also be broadcasted on BBC Wales and BBC2 on Easter Saturday.

ARTE also broadcasts a recording of the St John Passion from 6 April 2023. More details available here: <https://www.arte.tv/de/videos/114230-000-A/300-jahre-johannes-passion-von-johann-sebastian-bach/>

A very special, emotionally charged documentary about Bach will be available on DVD from 12 April 2024 and will also be screened at this year's Leipzig Bachfest. The film "LIVING Bach" takes an extraordinary journey across six continents to discover the universal mystery of J. S. Bach. Director Anna Schmidt meets many amateur musicians and singers who have made Bach the centre of their lives. They all share a common goal: to take part in the largest gathering of the Bach family, the Leipzig Bachfest "We are Family", which is to take place in Leipzig. More details available here: <https://www.schmidt-film.com/living-bach-93138.html?language=en>

Background St Nicholas Church and Bach Choir

Vocal church music has always played an important role in Leipzig's St Nicholas Church, which celebrated its 850th anniversary in 2015. J. S. Bach was inaugurated as St Thomas' Cantor here in 1723, and many of his cantatas, the St John Passion and parts of the Christmas Oratorio were first performed in St Nicholas' Church. Since 1945, when Johannes Piersig founded the Kantorei St Nicholas, conducting the choir has been one of the duties of the respective Nikolaikantor. Markus Kaufmann has held this position since December 2021. The main task of the Bach Choir at St Nicholas' Church Leipzig is the organization of services in St Nicholas Church, in addition to which several choral concerts are held each year.

Further Information

- <https://www.leipzig.travel/cityofmusic>
- <https://www.bachfestleipzig.de/en/bachfest/2024>
- <https://thomanerchor.de/>
- <https://www.bachchor-leipzig.de/de/home/>
- <https://www.gewandhausorchester.de/en/>

There are special travel packages including concert tickets for some amazing musical experiences in Leipzig: <https://www.leipzig.travel/en/book/planning-a-trip/travel-offers>