

BELSIZE BAROQUE

with the *Amici e Voci* choir

Bach *Christmas Oratorio*

Sunday
10 December 2023
6.30 pm

St Peter's Church, Belsize Square,
Belsize Park, London, NW3 4HY

www.belsizebaroque.org.uk



Christmas Oratorio BWV 248: Parts 1 to 3

Johann Sebastian Bach, during his prolific tenure in Leipzig, undertook the monumental task of creating a collection of works that could be woven into the fabric of the church calendar. This endeavour resulted in cycles of cantatas, each a masterful musical interpretation of scripture. However, in the 1730s, Bach embarked on a new project – the creation of oratorios for Christian festivals and major events that could be repeated each year, one of which we present tonight: the Christmas Oratorio.

Unlike cantatas, which explore and interpret scripture, oratorios such as the Christmas Oratorio narrate biblical events using the actual words from the Bible, resembling musical dramas. Recycling his own music from secular works written for a single performance, Bach ingeniously repurposed compositions that might have otherwise faded into obscurity.

Bach's Christmas Oratorio comprises six parts, and tonight's performance focuses on the exuberant first three parts. In December 1734 the citizens of Leipzig were treated to a musical feast over three consecutive days, each part resonating within the hallowed halls of the Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche. This cyclic unfolding mirrors the joyful span of Christmas itself, underscoring the significance of the events celebrated. Echoing the structure of Bach's Passions, the oratorio features a tenor Evangelist, who narrates key events using text from the Gospels.

Part 1: The Birth of Christ

Part 1 commences with one of Bach's most iconic choruses, setting a jubilant tone. The Alto's recitative and aria echo the Advent theme of preparation, while the Bass, accompanied by a triumphant trumpet solo, emphatically reminds the congregation that this new-born baby is also their King. The choir's rendition of "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" accompanied by majestic trumpet fanfares closes this part with a regal flourish.

Part 2: The Shepherds' Tale

Part 2 transports us to the pastoral setting of shepherds in the field. Bach employs an unusual and highly evocative ensemble of six woodwind instruments, including the distinctive oboe da caccia. Peculiar to Saxony, this instrument is an oboe carved into the shape of a hunting horn and covered in leather. The "Pastoral Symphony," a delightful orchestral interlude, was written especially for the oratorio and features the woodwind ensemble to full effect. The first aria, for tenor, introduces a joyous flute inviting the shepherds to witness the infant Jesus. Meanwhile, Mary sings a lullaby to the child with the aria "Schlafe, mein Liebster, genieße der Ruh'" ("Sleep, my beloved, enjoy your rest!"). This peacefulness is broken as an angel appears to the shepherds and is then joined by the heavenly host singing "Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe" ("Glory to God in the Highest"). Finally, a bass encourages us all to sing along with the angels.

Part 3: The Shepherds' Journey to Bethlehem

This part unfolds with the shepherds hurrying to Bethlehem – listen out for the scurrying violins and flutes accompanying the choir in the second chorus movement. Wonder and gratitude permeate the air over two arias featuring burbling oboes and a solo violin respectively. Hymn stanzas extol the joy of this momentous event, culminating in a reprisal of the opening chorus. This triumphant recapitulation serves as a resplendent finale.

Bach's Christmas Oratorio, a testament to his ability to weave musical brilliance with biblical narrative, invites us to experience the pages of scripture through his meticulously crafted music. Regardless of one's faith, this is music of the highest quality that still brings the Christmas spirit to life centuries later.

Programme notes by Richard Austen
Design/layout by Andrew Welsh

Nick Hardisty is a London-based musician who leads a complicated career in all sorts of musical pursuits. Having written his postgraduate thesis on the music of Max Bruch, worked in musical outreach and given pre-concert talks with renowned international artists, he now divides his time between running music festivals in the Lake District and as much playing and conducting as possible. Regardless of style, period or instrument, Nick is happiest on the concert platform armed with either modern violin, baroque violin, or conductor's baton. He is the founder and conductor of the Greenwich-based Meridian Collective, conducted the Chiltern Camerata and *Amici e Voci* in a programme of Handel and Monteverdi, and recently appeared on baroque violin at Shakespeare's Globe in The Secret Theatre. Inspired by his affection for chamber music and the naturally collaborative nature of smaller ensembles, he loves to apply this conversational approach to music-making to much larger forces.

Mark Johnstone founded *Amici e Voci* 20 years ago, inviting friends from a wide range of choirs to sing in a series of concerts to raise money for charity. Since then the choir has gone from strength to strength, performing concerts in London and Buckinghamshire to excellent reviews. The quality of singers it can draw on is demonstrated by the fact that all soloists are drawn from within the choir. The *Amici e Voci* repertoire spans the entire canon of choral music from the Renaissance to contemporary, *a capella* and works with orchestra. The choir is delighted to be working again with Belsize Baroque after their successful first collaboration last year performing Bach's *Magnificat* and *Ascension Oratorio*.

Choir

Sopranos: Cathryn Caunt, Julie Evans, Jane Metcalfe, Marie Power, Geraldine Rowe

Altos: Denise Fabb, Debbie Johnstone, Olivia Maffett, Jeremy Rowe

Tenors: Mark Johnstone, Neil Malcolm, Paul Parker, Matthew Tansley

Basses: Kevin Bailey, Robert Brignall, Jonathan Lane, Andrew Mackinder

Soloists

Evangelist: Richard Milnes

Cantata 1: Debbie Johnstone, Richard Milnes, Andrew Mackinder

Cantata 2: Cathryn Caunt, Jeremy Rowe, Richard Milnes, Andrew Mackinder

Cantata 3: Geraldine Rowe, Debbie Johnstone, Richard Milnes, Robert Brignall





Belsize Baroque would like to thank the Hampstead Church Music Trust, whose support has made this concert possible. We would also like to thank Richard Link and The Rofeh Trust for their generous donations in support of the orchestra, and the churchwardens of St Peter's for their assistance.

APERIVINO

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Open for wine, cocktails and
food after tonight's concert

Belsize Baroque

The orchestra comprises music professionals, music students and amateur players. Our amateur musicians come from many different walks of life, and our players in general come from all over the world. Many musicians who joined us as students over the years have gone on to successful careers in top orchestras. Since 2016 the generosity of supporters has in addition made our formal scholarship programme possible.

Over the past two decades, we have been privileged to work with renowned directors and many talented musicians. We have performed many large-scale works with numerous choirs, and have given performances in aid of charities, as well as working with the Handel House and the London Handel Festival. Our first concert at St Peter's was on 22 June 2013, since when we have been orchestra in residence at the church, enjoying the support of its staff and the local community.

Belsize Baroque Orchestral Society Ltd is a registered charity (number 1108596) and company (number 5267265). The orchestra can be hired for orchestral or choral concerts and other events, and is delighted to assist other charities. www.belsizebaroque.org.uk; Twitter: @Belsize_Baroque

Putting on performances, running workshops, and maintaining our scholarships all require funds. Concerts alone cannot cover the costs of these and we receive no regular external funding. All of the administration is carried out by unpaid volunteers. We hope that tonight's concert will inspire you to donate to the orchestra, which you can do very easily via the link below. Thank you for your generosity.
www.justgiving.com/campaign/belsizebaroque



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THE OLD MASTERS IN NEW HANDS

Sheku Kanneh-Mason MBE plays on a cello by Matteo Goffriller, Venice c1700, the 'Ex-Goritzki', made possible by the Florian Leonhard Fellowship, and an exceptionally fine bow by Nicolas Maire c1855, lent by a private sponsor.



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First violins

Catherine Martin
Sally Heath
Miranda Ford
Val Hudson

Second violins

Christine-Marié Louw
Mari Minoda
Greta Bommarito
Jenny Frost

Violas

Elizabeth Hart
Deborah Miles-Johnson
Roger Mears

Cellos

David Winfield
Jacob Garside

Double bass

Evangelos Saklaras

Organ

Michael Strange

Oboe and oboe d'amore

Susan Cooksley
Craig White

Oboe da caccia

Kate Bingham
Peter Tsoulos

Bassoon

Hillary Ougham

Trumpets

Elizabeth Foxley
Edward Smith
Eloise Yates

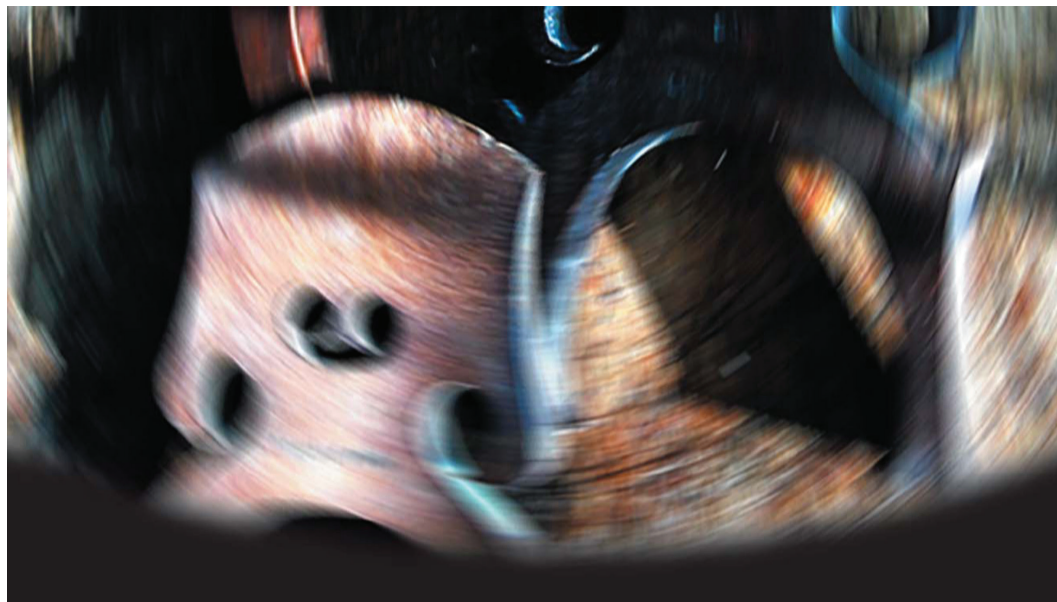
Timpani

Andrew Cumine

Flutes

Richard Austen
Naomi Anderson

Save the date! Our first scheduled concert of 2024 will be on Sunday 28 January at St Peter's, Belsize Park, directed by Catherine Martin. We will also be performing in the London Handel Festival on Saturday 16 March. Details will be available soon at www.belsizebaroque.org.uk.



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