

EMMANUEL MUSE



Bach: A Signature Season
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Bach's St. John Passion: A Masterpiece Both Beautiful and Harsh

Betrayal, arrest, trial, execution, and burial. Bach's unforgettable *St. John Passion* follows these inexorable events in the final days of Jesus' life. It is a study in contradiction: the raw emotion and bellicose language found within this Passion keep company with some of the most sublime music that Bach ever composed. No one who has ever performed this amazing work, witnessed it from the audience, or listened to it on a recording has ever forgotten it.

Emmanuel Music will present the *St. John Passion* on Saturday, March 8, at 8 p.m. The venue is Emmanuel Church, 15 Newbury Street, Boston, just steps away from the Arlington Street MBTA stop. Michael Beattie, Associate Conductor, will lead the Chorus and Orchestra of Emmanuel Music, which is the ensemble-in-residence at Emmanuel Church.

Leading the cast are tenor Charles Blandy as the Evangelist and bass Paul Guttry as Jesus. Baritone Sumner Thompson will portray Pilate and bass Mark McSweeney, Peter. Other featured performers are Kendra Colton, Pamela Dellal, Aaron Engebret, Frank Kelley, Jason McStoots, Krista River, and Kristen Watson. They will sing heart-stopping arias, expressing the deepest emotions about love, life, illness, sin, discipleship, and death.

Tickets are available to buy on the Emmanuel Music secure web site: www.emmanuelmusic.org, as is Emmanuel Music's CD recording of the 1725 version of the *St. John Passion*.

Prior to the performance, a free pre-concert discussion will take place in the Parish Hall. John Harbison, Emmanuel Music's Acting Artistic Director, as well as a noted composer and Institute Professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, will join with David Kudan, Rabbi-in-Residence at Memorial Church, Harvard University, and *St. John Passion* soloist Charles Blandy in a discussion of the musical and theological aspects of this complex piece. The public is welcome to attend this discussion, which begins at 7 pm.

Emmanuel Music's *St. John Passion* is certain to be a sellout in the 2007-08 Bach Signature Season. Nearly a decade has passed since its last performance of the 1725 version, one of several that Bach wrote, conducted by Emmanuel Music's founder Craig Smith. In the upcoming concert, a later, undated version will be featured, one where Bach restored several deleted arias

and choruses. He continued to revise the *St. John* for the rest of his life.

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Compared to the *St. Matthew Passion*, the *St. John Passion* is a more difficult work. As conductor Michael Beattie explains, “The *St. Matthew* has an absolutely perfect sense of proportion and a magisterial form from beginning to end. You engage with this piece in an almost meditative fashion. On the other hand, the *St. John* feels more condensed, harder edged, and confrontational. From the performers, it requires raw energy and a very careful sense of dramatic pacing. And the difficulty of singing some painful words can take its toll.”

Rabbi Kudan’s participation in the March 8 pre-concert seminar points to the great theological difficulty that surrounds the *St. John Passion*. During Bach’s time—and even earlier—many people believed that Jews were directly responsible for the death of Christ. In the *St. John*, Bach represents the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem as The Crowd (also known as the *Turbae*). They clamor for Christ’s crucifixion, never acknowledging the fact that he is himself a Jew.

The Evangelist, narrator of the Passion, also describes the Jews of Jesus’ time as dangerous people. These depictions reflect back to the Gospel of John, the only one of the four that talks not of “the people,” but of “the Jews.”

Charles Blandy, the Evangelist, has faced up to the problems of the *St. John Passion* in a unique way.

After three times in the role, Blandy finds that the Evangelist is a complicated character. “He is a storyteller. As a singer, you must decide to either disassociate yourself emotionally or participate in the action. My choice is to do the latter, since it behooves me to make an interpretative choice based on a particular melodic phrase or wording. The Evangelist’s role is both didactic and demonstrative. You must show what’s going on and not merely relate what is taking place.”

To Blandy, the Evangelist is a member of the community. “He’s not simply a musical journalist. Maybe he’s not the Apostle John, but he does follow Jesus. The death of Jesus affects him and his community quite profoundly, and he brings that community of believers into reality.”

Like Blandy, David Kravitz, long-time soloist with Emmanuel Music, has performed the *St. John* on prior occasions. Together these singers author Blue Mass Group, a lively blog that addresses a potpourri of issues. There, David describes his experience with performing the *St. John* in a piece titled “Live in Boston: The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ According to John.” See www.bluemassgroup.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=252.

On the other hand, Paul Guttry cherishes the opportunity to portray Jesus. “Because of his complexity and humanness, I have always loved singing his role in the *St. John Passion*. Though he knows his fate, Jesus can only take the next step as it is presented to him, and is swept up in the drama along with the listener. Bach brings us closer to Jesus’ experience by giving him a range of believable emotions: from defiant to protective, then scolding and confrontational, and finally fearful and vulnerable.”

But for Guttry, all collaborations with his beloved Emmanuel Music are singular. He feels the

powerful bond that unites the artists in this unique organization.

“I’ve been singing at Emmanuel since 1995. I am so grateful for the opportunities it has provided, including being able to sing Bach cantatas, Schütz motets, and other masterworks. What not everyone knows about making music at Emmanuel is that you’re surrounded by incredibly supportive colleagues. While you’re working hard on a Bach aria, everybody else up there is rooting for you. Even with Craig gone, we continue to benefit from his completely serious approach to music-making as the creator of this community.”

For those who want to learn more about the *St. John Passion*, see baritone David Kravitz’s piece on the Blue Mass Group blog that he Charles Blandy created. David shares his experience performing the *St. John* in a piece titled “Live in Boston: The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ According to John.” See www.bluemassgroup.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=252.

For a complete listing of upcoming Emmanuel Music performances, previous newsletter articles, and other information, please visit our website at www.emmanuelmusic.org.

Emmanuel Music is the Ensemble-in-Residence at Emmanuel Church.

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