



Masterworks of the Choral Tradition

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Tuesdays, November 18 to December 16, 2025 – 12:00p.m. to 1:30 p.m.

J.S. Bach – Sacred Choral Music

(Material selected from Wikipedia by S.L.)

The **cantatas** are among his most significant and celebrated compositions. While many have been lost, at least 209 of the cantatas composed by Bach have survived. Many of them date from the years between 1723 (when he took up the post of Thomaskantor, cantor of the main churches of Leipzig) and 1745 (when the last one was probably written). Working especially at the Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche, it was part of his job to perform a church cantata every Sunday and Holiday, conducting soloists, the Thomanerchor and orchestra as part of the church service. Works from three annual cycles of cantatas for the liturgical calendar have survived. In his first years in Leipzig, starting after Trinity of 1723, it was not unusual for him to compose a new work every week.

His cantatas usually require four soloists and a four-part choir, but he also wrote solo cantatas for typically one soloist and dialogue cantatas for two singers. He also composed a cycle of chorale cantatas based exclusively on one chorale. Within the Lutheran liturgy, certain readings from the Bible were prescribed for every event during the church year. Ideally, a cantata text started with an Old Testament quotation related to the readings, and reflected both the Epistle and the Gospel. Most of the solo movements are based on poetry of contemporary writers.

The **St. Matthew Passion** was first performed in 1724. It is the second of two Passion settings by Bach that have survived in their entirety, the first being the St John Passion, first performed in 1724. Bach wrote the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1727; for solo voices, double choir and double orchestra. It sets the 26th and 27th chapters of the Gospel of Matthew (in the Luther Bible) to music, with interspersed chorales and arias. It is widely regarded as one of the masterpieces of sacred music. Bach performed it often, on Good Fridays, but it wasn't heard in its entirety outside Leipzig until 1829, when the twenty-year-old Felix Mendelssohn performed a version in Berlin, with the Berlin Singakademie, to great acclaim.

The **Mass in B minor (BWV 232)** was one of Bach's last compositions, not completed until 1749. The Mass was never performed in its entirety during Bach's lifetime; the first documented complete performance took place in 1859. Recent literature suggests that in 1724, Bach composed the Sanctus; in 1733, the Kyrie and Gloria. During the last three years of his life, the Credo and Agnus Dei. The Mass in B minor is widely regarded as one of the supreme achievements in all classical music: the consecration of a whole life, started in 1733 for "diplomatic" reasons, it was finished in the very last years of Bach's life - when he had already gone blind. This monumental work is a synthesis of every stylistic and technical contribution he made to music.