Humanities Seminars Program
Bach’s St. John Passion: 300 Years Later

DATES AND TIMES:

February 7, 14, 21, 28 (four Wednesdays)
10:00 am - 12:00 pm
Optional: True Concord rehearsal, Wednesday, February 28, 7:00 pm
Catalina Foothills HS Auditorium

INSTRUCTOR:

Bruce Chamberlain
Professor Emeritus of Music
E-mail: bbc@arizona.edu

COARSE DESCRIPTION:

The two extant passion settings by J.S. Bach continue to move audiences of all faiths as profound artistic expressions and rank as some of the most poignant musical compositions ever written. Holy Week of 2024 celebrates the 300th anniversary of the first time that the Leipzig congregants heard the ST. JOHN PASSION, changing the scope and magnitude of Passion composition forever. This four-session course will examine the history and development of Passion genre from its earliest liturgical responsorial expressions to the monumental Oratorio–Passion structures of Bach’s St. John and St. Matthew Passions in the early to mid-18th century.

Course participants will also get an inside and up close experience with the preparation and execution of the ST. JOHN PASSION as performed by True Concord Voices and Orchestra in late March, coinciding with this HSP course.

REQUIRED TEXT

Daniel R. Melamed, Hearing Bach’s Passions, Oxford University Press, 2005
SESSION ONE (FEBRUARY 7-14, 2024): OVERVIEW OF PASSION SETTINGS
Topics to be discussed:
  Medieval and Renaissance Background
  The Drama
  The dramatic personae
  The orchestra

SESSION TWO (FEBRUARY 14, 2024): HEARING PASSIONS IN BACH’S TIME AND OURS
Required reading: Hear Bach’s Passions, pages 3-18
Topics to be discussed:
  Concept of authentic performance vs. historically informed performance
  Bach’s text sources
  St. John Passion overall structure

SESSION THREE (February 21, 2024): ANALYSIS OF PART I
Required Reading: Hearing Bach’s Passions, pages 19-48
Topics to be discussed:
  Vocal Forces
  The “Heartpiece”

SESSION FOUR (February 21, 2024): ANALYSIS OF PART II
Required Reading: Hearing Bach’s Passions, pages 66-77, 131-134
Topics to be discussed:
  Stage arrangement
  Intermission - other options
  Things to listen for at this evening’s rehearsal - insights from Eric Holtan