

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra April 6 programme complementary content

Last Easter the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir performed Bach's *St John Passion*, and now they return to present the composer's second – and arguably greatest – recounting of the Passion story.

Andrew Manze takes the podium to conduct Mendelssohn's arrangement of the *St Matthew Passion* and is accompanied on stage by four stellar soloists including Liverpool's own Kathryn Rudge.

The piece will be sung in German and there will also be a British Sign Language interpreter.

Watch Stephen Johnson talking about the concert programme [here](#).

In addition, this companion page draws together a range of complementary content that we hope will help shine further light on the pieces, the people who composed them and the performers bringing them to life here in Hope Street.

Kathryn Rudge interview

Cast your mind back over some of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's most memorable and important concerts of the last 15 years, and the chance is that [Kathryn Rudge](#) was also there on stage.

The Liverpool-born mezzo-soprano sang in Beethoven's Ninth at the Orchestra's [175th anniversary concert in 2015](#). A year before that she was a soloist in the world premiere of Michael Nyman's *Symphony No 10 – Hillsborough Memorial* – at Liverpool Cathedral, singing the names of the (then) 96 victims of the footballing tragedy.

And in January 2008 you would have found her draped in a Union Jack in the newly-opened arena, where the Orchestra and Chief Conductor Vasily Petrenko – stacked up precariously on scaffolding and a scissor lift – were arguably the stars of [Liverpool the Musical](#) which opened the city's Capital of Culture year.

“That was amazing,” she recalls. “I can't believe it's 15 years ago. It was something out of this world – I was up the scaffolding and I had a Britannia helmet on, which was too big for me!”

Before, between and after there have been many other collaborations – so many that the mezzo herself has lost count.

Now she's back at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall for two concerts in this current season.

Easter brings Bach's *St Matthew Passion* – her first time singing the sacred piece and also, despite her regular appearances in Hope Street, working with conductor Andrew Manze.

And then in June, she will return to sing in Sir Michael Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*, which is another 'first' for the 36-year-old.

“I heard it a lot through college,” she says of the 'modern oratorio'. “But it's lovely to get a performance of it, and to do it at home as well will be really special.”

Unsurprisingly, whether it's a new piece or an old friend, there's a lot of preparation that goes into a performance.

Kathryn explains: "The first point is initially to listen and imagine yourself in the role that you're suggested for. And then you get hold of the score and from that it's just a lovely process from learning the dots on the page to researching all around it.

"Any bit of information, I scribble all over the score. It's great because if you ever return to it, you've got your notes.

"And the beautiful thing in the process is the more you come back to something, it just seems to grow. With your life experiences as well, it takes on a whole different meaning.

"It keeps it fresh. It's not just about looking at 'how am I going to perform it?', but what would I feel if I was in the audience? Why did the composer set the text like this?

"There are so many questions - sometimes that never become answered."

Kathryn may not be able to tot up all her appearances with the Orchestra, but it was her first which had perhaps the most seismic effect on her.

While she took piano lessons as a child, appeared as a shepherd in *Amahl and the Night Visitors* at junior school ("I remember carrying an orange across the stage," she laughs), sang in the school choir and loved musicals, it wasn't until a neighbour at home in Hale Village suggested she try singing lessons that, encouraged by her mum and dad, she metaphorically – and literally – found her 'voice'.

That neighbour was soprano Polly Beck, currently vocal coach of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra Chorus, who became the 15-year-old Liverpool College student's first singing teacher.

"Meeting her changed everything. I count my lucky stars," Kathryn smiles. "She came into school, and it was never strict that we must learn 'this' repertoire, we just worked hard. She really inspired me.

"We started to do grades together, but it was mainly learning things like recitatives alongside an aria, the structures of things. I'd never come across that at 15.

"Polly was very open to allowing you to experiment with all different styles. She was great at being able to say 'I think your voice would suit this. Try this'. And then I didn't feel scared of it.

"It's funny because I just enjoyed singing. With the piano, I had a great teacher, but I was a bag of nerves."

When a music teacher handed her a leaflet for the Merseyside Young Singer of the Year, Kathryn decided to enter, singing not an operatic aria but 'I Could Have Danced All Night' from *My Fair Lady*. She won.

"From there I had the chance to sing with the Philharmonic Orchestra," she says. "It was unreal. That was all I wanted to do then, there wasn't any other subject I could see myself doing."

She went on to study voice with Susan Roper at the [Royal Northern College of Music](#), and in the last 12 years has become sought after for what reviewers have praised as her "powerful glow and gripping range", "impeccable intonation" and "gloriously sustained legato".

She made her opera debut at the English National Opera in 2012 playing Cherubino in Fiona Shaw's *The Marriage of Figaro*, and along with performing with leading opera companies – including Glyndebourne, Garsington Opera and Opera North – she has also sung at the *BBC Proms* and with many major orchestras.

From 2015-17 she was a [BBC New Generation Artist](#), and has also been an English National Opera Harewood Artist and a Times 'Rising Star of Classical Music'.

Alongside her busy professional schedule, for the last decade she has also been involved in [Mersey Waves Music](#) which she co-founded in 2013 and which champions community singing and music making in south Liverpool. In 2016 she won the [arts and culture](#) accolade in the Merseyside Woman of the Year awards.

"It's really important that message gets out there that music is also about your wellbeing," she points out. "At all points of life, no matter how hard things get, it's there for you and no matter what, ultimately, we should be going along to concerts or being a part of a community choir.

"Everyone who joins a choir says it's like a family. It's the music that unites everyone in just a purpose."

And she is also an active patron of [Clatterbridge Cancer Centre](#) which was so supportive of her family when her late mum and dad, George and Sue, were both diagnosed with cancer.

Kathryn says: "For me, singing and music and arts, there's this whole relationship between going through that and seeing how much music helped them both through their care at all stages..."

"Clatterbridge has an [arts programme with Liverpool Philharmonic now](#) and they take musicians in and perform for patients and relatives, and change the whole...it's amazing."

Andrew Manze

Since 2018, [Andrew Manze](#) has been Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and he's a great favourite of Liverpool audiences.

He made his debut with the Orchestra more than a decade ago and has appeared regularly on the Hope Street stage ever since.

With boundless energy and warmth – and an extensive and scholarly knowledge of the repertoire – Manze is in great demand as a guest conductor from some of the world's leading orchestras and ensembles.

He began his career as an Early Music specialist, becoming Associate Director of the Academy of Ancient Music at the age of 31. Along with a busy conducting career he also teaches, edits and writes about music and is in demand as a broadcaster.

He is currently Chief Conductor of the [NDR Radiophilharmonie](#).

Andrew Staples

[Andrew Staples](#) is considered one of the most versatile tenors of his generation and is in demand in both opera and as a concert artist.

A chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, he earned a music scholarship to Eton and was a choral scholar at King's College, Cambridge before he went on to the Royal College of Music where he studied under [Ryland Davies](#) and won the Peter Pears Scholarship.

He made his Royal Opera debut in *Fidelio* in the 2006/7 season and his extensive list of operatic roles includes Tamino in *Die Zauberflöte*, Andres in *Wozzeck* and *Peter Grimes* which he sang at [La Fenice](#) last summer.

Staples has also performed with many of the world's leading orchestras including the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, LSO, Orchestre de Paris and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

He specialises in British music in his recordings, which include works by Vaughan Williams, Purcell, Britten, and the 2017 release of [*The Dream of Gerontius*](#) under the baton of Daniel Barenboim.

Staples is also a photographer and makes music films. In 2021 he was awarded a grant from the Royal Philharmonic Society Enterprise Trailblazer Fund.

Listen to Andrew Staples sing in [*The Dream of Gerontius*](#).

Susanne Bernhard

Munich-born soprano [**Susanne Bernhard**](#) returns to Liverpool after performing in Britten's [*War Requiem*](#) in Liverpool Cathedral in 2018.

Bernhard started studying singing at the Munich University of Music and Theatre in 1995, aged 18, and has appeared extensively in opera houses, with international orchestras and at festivals across Europe and beyond.

Along with the *St Matthew* and *St John Passions*, her wide-ranging repertoire also includes Bach's *Magnificat* and *Mass in G minor* and works by Beethoven, Britten, Brahms, Bruckner, Mahler, Mendelssohn and Mozart.

Forthcoming engagements include Vaughan Williams' *Sea Symphony*.

Listen to Susanne Bernhard perform on [*Sacred Songs of the Romantic Period*](#).

Mark Stone

British baritone [**Mark Stone**](#) was born in London. He studied maths at King's College, Cambridge and later, after spending several years as a chartered accountant and investment banker, music at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

He made his operatic debut in 1998 when he performed the role of toreador Escamillo in *Carmen* for Opera North, and the same year he received the Decca Prize at the Kathleen Ferrier Awards. In 2005 he was nominated in the Breakthrough Artist category at the South Bank Awards.

Stone has sung in opera houses in Europe, America and New Zealand, including at the Royal Opera House, Glyndebourne and Welsh National Opera. As a company member with the English National Opera his roles have included *Don Giovanni*, Count Almaviva, Figaro in the *Barber of Seville*, and Prince Yamadori in Anthony Minghella's production of [*Madam Butterfly*](#).

He is also a much sought-after concert performer and has appeared with many leading orchestras, and as a keen recitalist he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall and St John's Smith Square.

In 2008 he founded the independent classic label, Stone Records.

Watch Mark Stone perform Frank Bridge's [*Come to Me in My Dreams*](#).

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Choir

When the Liverpool Philharmonic Society was founded in 1840, it saw the birth not only of an orchestra but of a chorus too.

[The Choir](#) added 'Royal' to its title in 1990.

In recent years, the Choir has performed Bach's *St Matthew Passion* and *Mass in B minor*, Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, Mahler's *Symphony No.2*, Rachmaninov's *Vespers*, Verdi's *Requiem*, Karl Jenkins' *Stabat Mater*, James MacMillan's *St John Passion*, the Duruflé *Requiem*, Britten's *War Requiem* and Handel's *Messiah*.

The Choir has also appeared in many of the UK's major concert venues – including the Royal Albert Hall – and has sung on a number of foreign tours.

It's a busy season for the Choir. Along with this concert, their season includes Handel's *Messiah*, Mozart's *Requiem* and Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*.

Johann Sebastian Bach

In March 1829, a 20-year-old [Felix Mendelssohn](#) created quite a stir when he organised and conducted a performance of Bach's [St Matthew Passion](#) in Berlin's Singakademie.

It might be inconceivable to us now, but this was one, if not the first time the sacred masterpiece had been performed since its composer had died nearly 80 years earlier.

Mendelssohn would go on to conduct another performance of it in 1841, this time in Leipzig.

But that first Easter-tide concert in front of Berlin's great and good (the audience included the King of Prussia and philosopher Friedrich Hegel) didn't just revive the Passion, it also revived interest in [Johann Sebastian Bach](#) himself.

Bach was kantor at St Thomas' Church in Leipzig when he composed the work in 1727 for solo voices, two choruses and two orchestra, taking two chapters of the Gospel of St Matthew which tell the story of Jesus' death on the cross as his text.

It was premiered in Leipzig on April 11 (three years after his St John's Passion) and contains some of its composer's most beautiful hymn tunes and stirring choruses.

Listen to the aria [Erbarme dich](#) from Mendelssohn's arrangement of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*.

About the Music

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750): St Matthew Passion

Composed: Leipzig, 1727

First Performed: 11 April 1727 (Good Friday), St Thomas Church, Leipzig, dir. JS Bach

We are all very lucky that Johann Sebastian Bach was born and brought up a Lutheran. Unlike some of the other great Protestant reformers, Martin Luther not only loved music, he saw it as vital to public worship, private devotion and education. Music was a crucial element in his attempt to open up the Christian story to ordinary people: the Bible would be sung in German, not Latin (as in the Roman Catholic Church), and in place of austere, otherworldly ritual, would be a new, more immediate kind of service – part religious service, part dramatic enactment – in which the congregation would be much more than passive, largely uncomprehending listeners. It

was, in effect, what we'd now call an 'immersive' experience. And no composer's talents and character were better suited to this than those of JS Bach.

Bach's *St Matthew Passion* – the second of his two surviving settings of the Bible story of the arrest, interrogation, torture and crucifixion of Christ – fills this brief gloriously. The *St Matthew Passion* is generally less operatic in style than the *St John*, with a greater emphasis on reflection: what does this mean to us now? Would we have behaved any better than the crowds that mocked and rejected Jesus? What does Jesus' suffering mean for us, collectively and as individuals? And yet the Christ that emerges here is truly both God and human being. We sense his increasing isolation as his disciples fail him, deny him (Peter) and even betray him to the Roman authorities (Judas). Yet it's hard not to feel a flicker of sympathy for his interrogator, Pontius Pilate, and much more for Peter when he realises his own cowardice and disloyalty. And then there's the astonishing moment where, just before his final breath, Jesus cries out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Is this God doubting himself? The narrator's shocked response, and the chorus' hushed 'Truly this man was the son of God', set to music which somehow manages to be so dignified yet also so piercingly human, conveys the sense that something spiritually seismic has happened – however we may choose to interpret it.

It's in the chorales that we sense how involving this musical drama would have been for Bach's congregation. Everyone would have known these hymn tunes, and their words, and they would have been able to take part in them as they meditated on the personal significance of each part of the story, so tellingly enhanced by Bach's wonderful harmonies. Even today, three centuries after it was written, *St Matthew Passion* can remind us powerfully how much more than abstract theology there is to the story of Christ's suffering and death. As one atheist philosopher put it: 'I don't believe, yet when I listen to this music, I do.'