



## Post-concert feedback, St John Passion 26th March 2023

This report sets out the results of the online survey of members immediately following the performance of Bach's St John Passion on 26th March 2023 at the Church of Christ the Cornerstone, Milton Keynes. An audience of approximately 140 attended the performance.

54 members who sang in the concert were asked to provide feedback on the rehearsals for the concert, the performance itself, the venue, and the practical organisation of the concert. Any other general comments were also invited.

35 members who did not sing in the concert received a separate questionnaire asking them whether they had attending any rehearsals for the concert, what their reasons were for not singing, and the most important of those reasons. If they were in the audience at the concert, they were invited to provide feedback on the performance.

Both questionnaires were anonymous and were open for responses until April 7th.

### MEMBERS WHO SANG IN THE CONCERT

The overall response rate to the survey of members who sang in the concert was 78% The response rate by voice section is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 Response rate by voice section**

	Singers	Responses	Response rate
Soprano	18	15	83%
Alto	21	16	76%
Tenor	7	4	57%
Bass	8	7	88%
Total	54	42	78%

## REHEARSALS AND THE PERFORMANCE

Members were asked to respond to eight statements about the rehearsals for the concert and the concert itself, on a five-point scale. The results reported in Table 2 combine 'Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree' responses into a single 'Disagree' category. Likewise, 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' responses are combined into a single 'Agree' category.

**Table 2 Summary feedback on rehearsals and the performance**

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Overall, I liked the St John Passion	1	4	37
	2%	10%	88%
When rehearsals started, the part felt within my ability	8	11	23
	19%	26%	55%
By the performance, I felt confident with my part	0	5	37
	0%	12%	88%
Overall, I enjoyed rehearsing for this concert	1	8	33
	2%	19%	79%
Overall, I enjoyed performing on the day	0	1	41
	0%	2%	98%
Overall, this concert was a success	0	0	42
	0%	0%	100%
As well as knowing the notes and rhythms, I felt able to put detail into my performance	2	10	30
	5%	24%	71%
Rehearsing and singing in this concert helped me extend my musical skills	2	5	35
	5%	12%	82%

It is particularly worth noting that 45% of respondents did not think that the part felt within their ability when rehearsals started, whereas only 12% did not feel confident with their part by the performance. The extent of movement from lack of confidence to confidence is larger than in other recent concerts. Table 3 shows the results for these two items for the preceding four concerts.

**Table 3 Singer confidence at start of rehearsals and at performance in recent concerts**

	Per cent agreeing that “When rehearsals started, the part felt within my ability”	Per cent agreeing that “By the performance, I felt confident with my part”	Per cent positive movement in confidence between start of rehearsals and performance
Messiah, 5 Dec 2021	93%	98%	+5%
Fauré/Dale 26 Mar 2022	63%	88%	+25%
Crowning Glory 5 Jun 2022	80%	95%	+15%
Counterpoint by Candlelight 19 Nov 2022	78%	89%	+11%
St John Passion 26 Mar 2023	55%	88%	+33%

35 members offered responses to the question: “Based on your experience in rehearsing and performing at this concert, what could you do to improve your own performances in future?”. Together these comments indicate the personal commitment that members have to the choir and the quality of its work, sometimes inevitably constrained by the demands on their time from other commitments. For example:

*I did a lot of 'homework' (the German was a challenge for me) but that additional work showed the value of extra practise at home!*

*I'm not sure I could do anymore. I spent many hours on my own learning the notes and listening to a recording to become more confident.*

*I worked harder at this than ever and still felt dissatisfied so the answer is I don't know.*

The largest number of comments were about the value of practice at home between rehearsals. Members referred to the value of the rehearsal aids, to listening to recordings, and to spending time learning and singing their part at home. The comments also highlight differences in practice techniques that members find helpful. For example:

*As always, more hours practising - I used the YouTube rehearsal aids, which were brilliant - if I'd had more time I would have used some others as well, and tested myself more in the run up to the concert.*

*Get my piano tuned and use it to learn the music, which is the best way, I find. Listening to choral parts, or recordings like the Spotify link that was kindly provided, didn't help a lot.*

Two members commented that they needed to express their needs or suggestions in rehearsal:

*Should have insisted on Mark going through our parts more in the rehearsals particularly the three very tricky pieces. Sat among singers singing different notes and with different timings means that not everyone was confident or knew their parts which led to the rest of the group not being confident including me.*

*Rehearsing in the formation used in the concert would be useful as you hear different singing parts in the concert that I didn't hear in rehearsals so cues for entry and listening to mesh together change.*

Other themes that emerged were:

- the challenges of singing in German (and in other languages).
- work on specific aspects of singing technique: breath control, phrasing and rapid semi-quavers were all mentioned.
- maintaining general health.
- attending more rehearsals.
- taking singing lessons – one member said they had just started lessons.

Members were also invited to offer any comments they wished to on their own performance. 25 did so. Seven members referred to their enjoyment at the performance, for example:

*It wasn't perfect but I enjoyed the experience immensely.*

*I really enjoyed it and felt that the work I had put in made me more confident.*

*I loved every minute of it - quite unusual for me.*

*I actually enjoyed it more than I thought I would. Not singing out too much in the afternoon rehearsal meant that I had enough voice left to get me through the concert!*

The standard achieved in the concert featured in a number of comments, all of which, in their own ways, demonstrate members' commitment to the quality of performance:

*I think I did my absolute best, and I followed Mark's conducting throughout.*

*I was pleased to realise I had done enough practice to sing confidently. Even if I made the occasional mistake, it was lovely to feel I was singing well most of the time.*

*On the night, I felt greatly inspired by both the music itself, and the professional musicians performing with us. I'm sure my own performance was lifted a notch or two as a result.*

*I just managed to get about 80% right on the night. So rather unsatisfied that I was not able to manage the expected standard of singing this time.*

*I felt that there could have been more light and shade in our performance - I had few dynamics or other expressive markings in my copy from Mark.*

Three comments referred to the importance of the voice section as a whole:

*I should work harder to make the whole group better.*

*I am one of the weaker sopranos so was glad to be surrounded by better singers.*

*Listening to others in my section helped me check I was in time (I have a tendency to rush).*

Three members said singing in German has consequences for their own performance and enjoyment:

*As has been recognised by Mark and Alex the German made this harder. I can read German but can't translate much. For me it was like singing just sounds and completely lost the poignancy and emotion and meaning of this deeply spiritual and personally meaningful music.*

*It took all my energy and concentration to deal with the music and text and whilst I thought the soloists were wonderful and the work and skills of Mark and Alex very much appreciated, I'm afraid the struggle spoiled my favourite passion which I have sung twice before in English.*

*I was not able to watch Mark as closely as I would normally because of my language difficulties.*

One member felt the timing of the rehearsal on the day affecting them negatively:

*I find such long rehearsals on the day of an actual concert leave me feeling worn out for the actual event, the voice is affected as a result. I wonder if we can opt for a full rehearsal two days before the actual event with a short rehearsal on the actual day. In each of the last three concerts I have felt like I'm losing the will to live by the concert. The voice is tired and my best performance is being given in the rehearsal before the event.<sup>1</sup>*

## **VENUE AND ORGANISATION**

Members were asked to respond to statements about the venue for the concert, the practical organisation of the concert and the final rehearsal on concert day, the layout and staging for the concert and the choir's entrances and exits. The

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<sup>1</sup> The practical difficulties and costs of booking venues, soloists and ensembles may mean that there is little that can be done to address this issue.

results are reported below in Table 4, with the same merging of responses as in Table 2 above.

**Table 4 Feedback on the venue and practical organisation of the concert**

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Overall, the venue worked well for this concert.	1	4	37
	2%	10%	88%
Overall, the practical organisation of the concert and the rehearsal on the concert day was effective.	0	6	36
	0%	14%	86%
Overall, I was satisfied with the choir layout and staging used for this concert.	0	3	39
	0%	7%	93%
Overall, I was satisfied with the choir's entrances to and exits to the worship area.	1	5	36
	2%	12%	86%

22 members offered written comments on the venue and the organisation of the concert.

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## THE VENUE

The great majority of comments on the venue were positive, for example:

*I really like Christ the Cornerstone as a venue. Not only is it convenient with easy parking and access, etc., but it's circular shape means there is a greater connection with the audience than otherwise. Having the audience in the mezzanine, too, we great - for them and us - made it feel a bit like we were performing in a theatre.*

*If the acoustics are not as good as some other venues, I think it's well worth that small sacrifice for a venue with so many benefits, it seems a shame we can't use it more often.*

The benefits cited included the heating, accessibility, parking, the number of toilets, the space available in various rooms and the octagonal shape which means, according to one member: *"there is a greater connection with the audience than otherwise"*.

On the other side of the account, members identified some problems:

- Arrangements for the storage of coats were not ideal. It was difficult at first to find the hanging rails provided, they were not in a secure location separated from the audience.

- The light bulbs behind the dais were not working.<sup>2</sup>
- There was no space reserved for choir members, where coats and bags could be left.

Christ the Cornerstone has many advantages that other churches used by the choir lack, including all those cited by members. We were also able to offer separate rooms for the orchestra and for the soloists (as a group), and the Guildhall provides an excellent space for interval refreshments. However, no venue is perfect. The arrangements for storing coats and bags were the only option offered by the venue manager, and there is no space outside the worship area, other than the Guildhall, large enough to accommodate choir members.

But Christ the Cornerstone’s two most significant disadvantages as a concert venue are the difficulty in using it on Saturday evenings, and the cost. Every Saturday evening, there is a Vigil Mass at 5:30 pm. Ahead of this service, the dais and area around it would need to be cleared, and then rapidly re-assembled ahead of the concert. The Board thinks that this presents an unacceptable risk to the quality of concert organisation, effectively making the venue unavailable on Saturdays. But the greatest issue is its cost. Christ the Cornerstone charged £1,538 for this concert. The concert was only made financially viable by a generous donation of the half of the venue cost from a choir member. For comparison, the venue costs for other recent concerts were:

Concert	Venue	Cost
Messiah, 5 Dec 2021	The Venue, Walton High	£1,110
Fauré/Dale, 26 Mar 2022	St Mary and St Giles, Stony Stratford	£248
Counterpoint by Candlelight, 19 Nov 2022,	St Peter and St Paul, Newport Pagnell	£318

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## ORGANISATION

Three potential improvements to the organisation of the concert were identified:

- choir members were not briefed that the Guildhall was available for use by singers in between the rehearsal and the concert;
- it would have been possible to gather the choir together in the Guildhall before the concert. One member said: *“Just a few words of encouragement as a choir together before performing from Mark or Alex, before setting forth, might be welcome.”*
- arrangements for the audience in the balcony could be reviewed: *“It was hard to communicate about seating upstairs, how to get there, and selling raffle tickets and programmes to people who went upstairs. Need to rethink*

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<sup>2</sup> These lights have not been working for many years. The venue manager has told us that the only way to change the bulbs is to hire and erect scaffolding that is prohibitively expensive.

*location of sales points, or send someone upstairs to sell tickets and programmes next time.”*

## ENTRANCES AND EXITS

Although the great majority of members were, overall, satisfied with the choir entrances and exits, there were some comments suggesting improvements could be made:

*I thought that it was very well organised except for rehearsing the entrance and exit at the end of the afternoon rehearsal. It would have been better before the start. I would like to congratulate the team on their excellent work.*

*Assembling in the cloisters was a good idea, but I was aware that there were some members of the choir who were unsure as to where they were to line up.*

*The organisation regarding entrances/exits was really not good, poor communication, there were different messages given. It worked, after a fashion, but could and should have been better/neater to create a more 'professional' image. It was good to have the sit/stands for during the work in advance, it's the 'other' stand/sits - beginning & end, that causes confusion for 'some'.*

## APPLAUSE BY THE CHOIR

At the end of the concert, members of the choir joined in the applause for the soloists and orchestra while the choir was still standing. Afterwards, a member said they felt this practice was inappropriate. Views on this issue were sought both from members who sang in the concert and those who did not. The results in this section are therefore based on all 66 responses to both surveys. Table 5 shows the distribution of responses across the options offered.

**Table 5 Should the choir join in the applause at the end of the concert?**

	Number	Per cent of all respondents	Per cent excluding respondents choosing 'Other'
The choir should not join in the applause at all.	2	3%	4%
The choir should only join in the applause when it is seated.	26	42%	54%
The choir should be able to join in the applause whether standing or seated.	20	32%	42%
Other	14	23%	

Respondents who chose 'Other' as their response gave a wide variety of responses. Two indicated that the issue did not matter to them. Other comments:



- expressed a strong wish to applaud the soloists and instrumentalists, for example: *"We've always joined in the applause to show our appreciation of the orchestra and soloists and I see no reason to stop. We're not professionals after all." ... "How lovely that there was spontaneous applause."*
- emphasised the need for a protocol, for example: *"there needs to be a protocol in place as this was messy on the night." ... "It is usual that the choir does not join in the applause unless seated. But Mark did not indicate that we should sit."*
- argued that choir applause should only happen when it is clear that soloists and instrumentalists are the focus of attention: *"the choir should join in the applause only when the MD is highlighting the soloists, orchestra or individual players". ... "Should applaud our guests but not when the choir is being highlighted to the audience - and to be very aware when this is!"*

It is clear that the great majority of members wish to be able to applaud the soloists and instrumental players and see the need for a protocol to be observed with discipline by singers. There is a majority in favour of applauding only when the choir is seated, as against when seated or standing, although views on these two options are more evenly balanced.

## OTHER COMMENTS

31 members offered other written comments on the concert. These are given below, grouped by theme, unless they cover issues already addressed earlier in this report, such as applause by the choir. A number of comments offered thanks for Mark, Alex and members of the Board for their contributions, including, for example: "Thank you, Mark and Alex, for trusting us to perform this challenging work." These are not listed below.

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## OVERALL REACTIONS

*From first arrival in the afternoon, there was a wonderful atmosphere at the venue and a sense that concert was going to be very special. Its success on the day was in no small part ensured by everything running smoothly, and it is important that those who worked hard to make sure it did are thanked and acknowledged. I am personally very grateful to everyone who helped behind the scenes. My feeling is that performing St John Passion in its original language and pitch, accompanied by period instruments, caused us to connect with the music in a way that we otherwise might not have done. There was a risk that we wouldn't cope with it but, by Mark allowing us the opportunity, we have all just experienced the most dramatic, moving and inspiring concert some of us have ever performed. I found it extraordinary, and I can feel the music still resonating now, two days later. In me, it's caused a bit of a paradigm shift; I feel a lot more confident about performing than before, and I think my voice has improved - possibly because I kept forgetting to worry but also because SJP is a vocal workout both in practise and*

*performing. The realisation that I can participate in music at this level just makes me want to start working towards the next concert and keep developing myself as a singer. Thank you Mark, Alex (and Bach), I hope we did you (all) proud!*

*It was a shame that there weren't slightly more singers taking part. I fear that some people were deterred by the complexity of the piece. Although I took part and loved it, I was scared that I would do something stupid and mess up the whole thing for everyone. OOH and the soloists were brilliant. I felt very sorry for the soprano when she lost it, but I had very much enjoyed her performance and everyone else's in the rehearsals.*

*Thrilling experience.*

*For me, it was an emotional experience and I felt the choir were committed and on really great form.*

*A good concert and seemed well attended, the soloists were a great on the day and showed professionalism, the concert worked well.*

*It was a joy to learn this piece and to perform at Christ the Cornerstone.*

*Having the period instruments and such super soloists was the 'icing on the cake'! More Bach please. And a big thank you to all those involved in the organisation/preparation.....*

*It was an amazing concert and it was wonderful to have both period instruments and such talented soloists. The only shame was that the audience was not bigger, so anything that can be done to publicise events like this more would be fantastic (articles in local papers, social media campaigns, sponsorship from local firms etc.)*

*It was fantastic performing with those brilliant young singers and the baroque orchestra was wonderful and lent so much to the overall atmosphere.*

*It was a marathon event but rewarded by the monumental gift from Bach.*

*The soloists and orchestra were of a very high standard and I felt compelled to join in the applause on this occasion. This was one of the best Chorale concerts I have taken part in.*

*I love performing big classical works. My guests said they really got into the music, it exceeded their expectations*

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## SINGING IN GERMAN

*Singing in German was a challenge and not at all sure that the performance gained from it. If we are trying to be inclusive - English would have been better.*

*I did find the German hard and still feel that a performance in English would have had more emotional impact. However on the day I felt that it worked well and one of the audience commented that it wasn't a problem because of the translation in the programme.*

*I had great difficulty selling any tickets as people were discouraged by the fact the concert was all going to be in German...they said they'd like to hear the mass but in English, so understandable.*

*I would also like to add my two penn'orth on singing in German. I wonder how many of the audience understood it and, given the emphasis on its being a narrative/a story, feel that English would have been better for the audience and allowed them to concentrate on the Evangelist in particular, rather than having to follow it in the programme.*

*Although I understand the reasons for singing it in German, I felt that it would have been more accessible for the audience if it had been sung in English. Also far too much rehearsal time was lost learning the pronunciation when it could have been better spent refining other details of the music.*

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## REHEARSALS

*It was an absolute joy to sing this music and many many thanks to Mark and Alex for making the rehearsals so good - efficient, hard work but in a very pleasant, encouraging, cheerful atmosphere.*

*Sectionals were needed for this concert to fully understand our parts-not sure why they didn't happen.*

*I did not find singing 'dooby doo' in rehearsal helpful. It was the words rather than the notes which needed the work so I didn't feel it helped pronunciation or expression. Also, if one got lost it was hard to get back in.*

*I found Mark and Alex's coaching styles complimentary. Many thanks to both of them. It was great to do note bashing with Alex early on. He showed great patience and gave me a good foundation to work from. Thank you to everyone who worked so hard to deliver this concert. It was wonderful and memorable to be part of it.*

*It might have been interesting to have had a small semi-chorus from Chorale to sing 'Wohin'. I do feel that there was never really any attempt to rehearse this movement properly.*

## OTHER ISSUES

*The end was a bit vague, no clear signal to exit some members walked out formally some joined the audience - audience seemed unsure /unclear also.*

*I do think that the option of live streaming should be more thoroughly investigated - there are many people who are not physically able to come to the concert who might want to live stream and this may be an additional income stream.*

## MEMBERS WHO DID NOT SING IN THE CONCERT

The overall response rate to the survey of members who did not sing in the concert was 58%. The response rate by voice section is shown in Table 6.

**Table 6 Response rate by voice section**

	Members	Responses	Response rate
Soprano	15	8	53%
Alto	11	8	73%
Tenor	4	1	25%
Bass	5	3	60%
Total	35	20	58%

## REHEARSALS

17 (85%) of respondents attended some of the rehearsals for the concert. Respondents who attended any rehearsals were asked to rate their enjoyment of rehearsals on a five-point scale, from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'. Nine members who attended any rehearsals agreed or strongly agreed that they had enjoyed them, four disagreed, and four were neutral.

## REASONS FOR NOT SINGING

Respondents were given a list of nine pre-set reasons for not singing, and could also list any other reason. They were first asked to select all reasons that applied to them. The results for this item are shown in Table 7.

**Table 7 All reasons for not singing**

<b>All reasons for not singing</b>	N	%
I had another planned commitment on the concert day.	5	25%
A change of circumstances meant I had to pull out at short notice.	-	0%
I was not able to attend enough rehearsals.	2	10%
I found the music too difficult to sing.	2	10%
I didn't like the music.	4	20%
The venue did not work for me.	1	5%
I was unwell.	7	35%
I was concerned about the Covid risk at rehearsals	3	15%
I was concerned about the Covid risk at the performance	3	15%
Other	6	30%

The other reasons identified included difficulties singing in the upper range, singing in German, mobility issues, difficulties with vision, and domestic commitments.

Respondents were also asked to identify the single reason which was most important in them deciding not to sing in the concert. The results are shown in Table 6.

**Table 8 Most important reason for not singing**

<b>Most important reason for not singing</b>	N	%
I had another planned commitment on the concert day.	3	15%
A change of circumstances meant I had to pull out at short notice.	-	0%
I was not able to attend enough rehearsals.	2	10%
I found the music too difficult to sing.	-	0%
I didn't like the music.	3	15%
The venue did not work for me.	-	0%
I was unwell.	6	30%
I was concerned about the Covid risk at rehearsals	-	0%
I was concerned about the Covid risk at the performance	-	0%
Other	6	30%

Five respondents offered written comments on why they did not sing:

*I gave in to my 'dislike' of the music for the very first time & I regret it. I should have persevered.*

*Unable to get any enjoyment from the experience.*

*My current health situation means I cannot attend, but hope to resume later in the year.*

*I feel very disappointed not to have joined in the performance of this great music. It was particularly galling as I feel we should perform more in this building. Even with its limitations for positioning everyone and keeping a balance of sound, it is central and attracts more of an audience than The Venue or other churches.*

*Singing every week about a dark topic was damaging my mental health, so I agreed in February to step away.*

## **AUDIENCE FEEDBACK FROM MEMBERS**

Eight respondents attended the concert in the audience; seven offered the following comments:

*The performance was outstanding, both the choir and the soloists*

*I really enjoyed the concert. It sounded really good*

*Enjoyed the concert but would have preferred to hear ( and sing) in English*

*The performance was a wonderful experience. The choir were on the ball and matched the professionals in the orchestra and the young soloists. Everyone gave a riveting performance. The Evangelist was outstanding and I am sure he will be sought after for this role in future. Well done Alex for sticking it out with a blinding migraine.*

*The young upcoming soloists were absolutely fabulous. It's great to commit to giving early-stage career singers portfolio-augmenting opportunities.*

*Uplifting to hear Chorale singing profoundly moving music with superb soloists. Period instruments enhanced the experience. Think I may have found German difficult*

*The sound was well-balanced and professional. It was certainly one of the better performances, from what I could tell.*