

# WIGMORE HALL 125

Friday 19 December 2025  
7.30pm

## Music for Christmas: Bach and Kuhnau

### Vox Luminis

Lionel Meunier director, bass, recorder

Erika Tandiono soprano I	Tuomo Suni concertmaster, violin I	Jasu Moisio recorder
Zsuzsi Tóth soprano I	Antina Hugosson violin I	Jasu Moisio oboe I
Maëlys Robinne soprano II	Cynthia Freivogel violin II	Rodrigo Gutiérrez oboe II
Līga Zīriņa soprano II	Birgit Goris violin II	Dymphna Vandenaabeele oboe III
Kateřina Blížkovská alto	Wendy Ruymen viola	Lisa Goldberg bassoon
Sophia Faltas alto	Jorlen Vega viola	Russell Gilmour trumpet I
Jan Kullmann alto	Philine Lembeck cello	William Russell trumpet II
Christopher B Fischer tenor	Benoit Vanden Bemden double bass	Krešimir Fabijanić trumpet III
Philippe Froeliger tenor		Sam Kinrade trumpet IV
João Moreira tenor		Koen Plaetinck timpani
Vincent De Soomer bass		Riccardo Casamichiela organ
Sebastian Myrus bass		

Johann Kuhnau (1660-1722)

Magnificat in C (c.1700)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Christen, ätzet diesen Tag BWV63 (c.1714-5)

*Interval*

Magnificat in E flat BWV243a (1723)



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**Johann Kuhnau** was something of a polymath; he studied law at Leipzig University, but was also active as a translator, novelist and poet – these he combined with his compositional and teaching duties as Thomaskantor, a post he held for 21 years before Johann Sebastian Bach arrived in Leipzig to take over the role. The *Magnificat* is his largest surviving vocal work, and excellently showcases Kuhnau's compositional style that straddles the 17th and 18th centuries. The chorus movements mix glorious homophonic writing with counterpoint, while solo movements capture a turn to the high Baroque. Take the soprano solo, whose tricky intervallic leaps expressing the celebratory joy of the Virgin Mary are bolstered by an obbligato oboe in eager echoes. There is evocative word-painting that, as we shall hear, Leipzigers would come to expect in festive music. The musicologist James Halliday, for example, notes how the fragmentary vocal lines for *Esurientes* ('the hungry') become luxuriant melismas on *implevit bonis* ('he filled them with good things').

Bach's cantata *Christen, ätzet diesen Tag* BWV63 was probably premièred on Christmas Day 1714 in Weimar. Given the scale of the ensemble required, including four trumpets and timpani, the cantata could not have been performed in the Himmelsburg, Weimar's court chapel. Presumably the larger town church of St Paul was the setting for its first performance.

The anonymous text is a seven-part commentary on the Epistle of the day organised symmetrically around the central line of the central recitative – 'to pure salvation and mercy' (*In lauter Heil und Gnaden*). Bach highlights this axis with a turn from *recitativo secco* to *arioso*, and the vigorous tumble into the second half of the cantata that follows thematises a well-worn pun. As the tenor declares that his 'bow is drawn tight, his sword sharpened', the cellist wields her weapon of choice: scalic ricochets and arpeggios punctuate the texture, setting up an elegant call to the dance.

The emotional heart of the cantata, however, occurs earlier – in the soprano and bass duet. An oboe weaves an extraordinary obbligato line that mellifluously ties together the voices. While 'grace' might be depicted as some ethereal thing, ribboning in the air, note how the melismatic emphasis occurs instead on 'build' (*bauen*). As the voices move in contrary motion, a drawn-out sequence made up from the very building blocks of musical composition itself, Bach seems to pay heed to the difference between grace freely gifted from God and the spiritual work and practice required by hardworking Lutherans.

As we reach the heavenly plane in the final chorus, I'm reminded of the theologian and music theorist Christoph Frick. Writing in 1631, Frick declared that earthly instruments, when compared to their heavenly counterparts, sounded no better than a knife against a 'chopping board in the kitchen'. Bach did his best with

such materials, indeed, the 'metal' recalled in the opening movement, by providing us with a glimpse of the everlasting splendours – trumpet fanfares, potentially outdone by the three oboes working in double time, and then the strings in streams of demisemiquavers (is this the prayer for 'flames of devotion be redoubled' from the previous recitative come to fruition?). The unashamedly homophonic writing in the choir triumphs over the instrumental choirs in communal fervour.

During his first Christmas in Leipzig, in 1723, Bach revived the Cantata 63. But he needed something to accompany the work. The *Magnificat* in E flat was composed for this occasion (it predates the more familiar D major revised version BWV243). Additional texts, including three carols and a *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, were interpolated between the verses of this work.

Despite this being an extremely busy time of the year, Bach did not pause in invention – the *Magnificat* teems in different colours, timbres and musical imagery. The choir enters with musical laughter – rhetoric which is later drawn upon by the trilling trumpets. Even within the enveloping polyphony, there are moments of intricate detail: a pair of flutes momentarily emerge, like seals as if to grab air. It's a celebration of all human life – big and small, momentous and insignificant.

The reflective verses of the Vespers are assigned to the soloists. In the 'Et misericordia', a duet for alto and tenor – the compound quadruple time and E minor key presaging the opening of the *St Matthew Passion* to come four years later – flutes shadow the violins with the fragility of pious fear. In 'Suscepit Israel', the alto and soprano soloists weave mournful lines around the plainsong chant in the oboes. At the beginning of this movement, we're reminded of mankind's original sin – but only for a quaver. The soprano enters an augmented fourth – an interval nicknamed the *Diabolus in musica* – above the bassline; Bach simultaneously represents and tempts us with the most fleeting of harmonic transgressions.

Bach's interest in genealogy is all too apparent in 'Omnes generationes', a vigorous fugal chorus. In two separate sections, Bach arranges the fugal entries in a stepwise ascending pattern. Each vocal part imitates the last, at a regular distance of two beats, and one degree of the scale higher. These fugal entries, each superseding the last, cover the range of an entire octave – twice; a huge family tree painted in sound.

But my favourite musical pun is Bach's final trick. As the doxology closes 'as it was in the beginning', Bach treats us to a condensed recapitulation of the opening movement. A move that's as fresh and brilliant as it was 300 years ago.

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## Johann Kuhnau (1660-1722)

### Magnificat in C (c. 1700)

*Biblical text*

Magnificat anima mea Dominum	My soul doth magnify the Lord
Et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo.	And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae, Ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generationes.	Because He hath regarded the humility of His slave: For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est et sanctum nomen eius.	Because He that is mighty hath done great things to me; and holy is His name.
Et misericordia ejus a progenie in progenies timentibus eum.	And His mercy is from generation unto generations, to them that fear Him.
Fecit potentiam in brachio suo dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.	He hath shewed might in His arm: He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.
Deposuit potentes de sede, et exaltavit Humiles.	He hath put down the might from their seat, and hath exalted the humble.
Esurientes implevit bonis: et divites dimisit inanes.	He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away.
Suscepit Israel puerum suum recordatus misericordiae suae.	He hath received Israel His servant, being mindful of His mercy:
Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros, Abraham et semini eius in saecula.	As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.
Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto.	Glory be the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper in saecula saeculorum. Amen.	As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forever and ever, Amen.

## Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

### Christen, ätzt diesen Tag BWV63 (c.1714-5)

*Johann Michael Heineccius*

<i>Coro</i> Christen, ätzt diesen Tag In Metall und Marmorsteine! Kommt und eilt mit mir zur Krippen Und erweist mit frohen Lippen Euren Dank und eure Pflicht; Denn der Strahl, so da einbricht, Zeigt sich euch zum Gnadenscheine.	<i>Chorus</i> Christians, engrave this day in metal and marble! Come and hasten with me to the manger and show with joyous song your gratitude and duty; for the dawning radiance reveals itself to you as the light of grace.
<i>Recitativo</i> O selger Tag! o ungemeines Heute, An dem das Heil der Welt, Der Schilo, den Gott schon im Paradies Dem menschlichen Geschlecht verhiess, Nunmehr sich vollkommen dargestellt Und suchet Israel von der Gefangenschaft und Sklavenketten Des Satans zu erretten. Du liebster Gott, was sind wir Armen doch? Ein abgefallnes Volk, so dich verlassen; Und dennoch willst du uns nicht hassen; Denn eh wir sollen noch nach dem Verdienst zu Boden liegen, Eh muss die Gottheit sich bequemen, Die menschliche Natur an sich zu nehmen Und auf der Erden Im Hirtenstall zu einem Kinde werden. O unbegreifliches, doch seliges Verfügen!	<i>Recitative</i> O blessèd day! O wondrous day on which the Saviour of the world, the Shiloh promised by God in paradise to the human race, reveals himself completely and seeks to save Israel from being imprisoned and fettered by Satan's slavish chains. O most loving God! What are we, poor creatures? A fallen race that has forsaken Thee. And even then Thou dost not hate us; for rather than let us, as we deserve, writhe on the ground, the Godhead itself deigns to take on human shape, and on earth be born in a stable. O incomprehensible, yet blessèd dispensation!

*Work continues overleaf. Please turn the page as quietly  
as possible.*

<i>Aria</i>	<i>Aria</i>
Gott, du hast es wohl gefüget, Was uns jetzo widerfährt. Drum lasst uns auf ihn stets trauen Und auf seine Gnade bauen, Denn er hat uns dies beschert, Was uns ewig nun vergnüget.	God, Thou hast well ordained what for us now comes to pass. Let us then ever trust in Him and build upon His grace; for He has bestowed on us this gift, which causes us eternal joy.

<i>Recitativo</i>	<i>Recitative</i>
So kehret sich nun heut Das bange Leid, Mit welchem Israel geängstet und beladen, In lauter Heil und Gnaden. Der Löw aus Davids Stamme ist erschienen, Sein Bogen ist gespannt, das Schwert ist schon gewetzt, Womit er uns in vor'ge Freiheit setzt.	And so today, the anguish and the pain which beset and troubled Israel, gives way to pure salvation and mercy. The lion from David's line has appeared, His bow is drawn tight, His sword sharpened, with these He shall bring us our former freedom.

<i>Aria</i>	<i>Aria</i>
Ruft und fleht den Himmel an, Kommt, ihr Christen, kommt zum Reihem, Ihr sollt euch ob dem erfreuen, Was Gott hat anheut getan! Da uns seine Huld verpfelet Und mit so viel Heil beleget, Dass man nicht g'nug danken kann.	Call and implore heaven, come, ye Christians, come to the dance, you should rejoice at God's deeds today! For He has accorded us such grace, bestowed on us such salvation, more than we can thank him for.

<i>Recitativo</i>	<i>Recitative</i>
Verdoppelt euch demnach, ihr heissen Andachtsflammen, Und schlägt in Demut brünstiglich zusammen! Steigt fröhlich himmelnan Und danket Gott für dies, was er getan!	May then your ardent flames of devotion be redoubled, fall to your knees fervently in homage! Rise joyously up to Heaven and thank God for what He has done!

<i>Coro</i>	<i>Chorus</i>
Höchster, schau in Gnaden an Diese Glut gebückter Seelen! Lass den Dank, den wir dir bringen, Angenehme vor dir klingen, Lass uns stets in Segen gehn, Aber niemals nicht geschehn, Dass uns der Satan möge quälen.	Almighty God, gaze graciously on the fervour of these humble souls! May the thanks that we offer be pleasing unto Thee; may we ever walk in grace, let it never come to pass that Satan should torment us.

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## Interval

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### Johann Sebastian Bach

#### Magnificat in E flat BWV243a (1723)

##### *Liturgical text*

<i>Chorus</i>	<i>Chorus</i>
Magnificat, anima mea, Dominum.	My soul doth magnify the Lord:

<i>Aria</i>	<i>Aria</i>
Et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo, salutari meo	And my spirit rejoiceth in God my Saviour.

<i>Chorus</i>	<i>Chorus</i>
Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her, Ich bring euch gute neue Mär; Der guten Mär bring ich so viel, Davon ich sing'n und sagen will.	From heaven above to earth I come, to bear good news to every home; glad tidings of great joy I bring, whereof I now will say and sing.

<i>Aria</i>	<i>Aria</i>
Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae. Ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent	For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden. For behold from henceforth

<i>Chorus</i>	<i>Chorus</i>
Omnes generationes.	All generations shall call me blessed.

<i>Aria</i>	<i>Aria</i>
Quia fecit mihi magna, qui potens est, Et sanctum nomen eius.	For he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his name.

<i>Chorus</i>	<i>Chorus</i>
Freut euch in jubiliert; Zu Bethlehem gefunden wird Das herzeliebe Jesulein, Das soll euer Freud und Wonne sein.	Rejoice and celebrate; in Bethlehem will be found the dearest Jesus child, and he will be your joy and delight.

<i>Duet</i>	<i>Duet</i>
Et misericordia eius a progenie in progenies, Timentibus eum.	And his mercy is on them that fear him throughout all generations.

<i>Chorus</i> Fecit potentiam in brachio suo, Dispersion superbos mente cordis sui.	<i>Chorus</i> He hath showed strength with his arm, he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
<i>Chorus</i> Gloria in excelsis Deo! Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.	<i>Chorus</i> Glory to God in the highest! And on earth peace, good will towards men.
<i>Aria</i> Deposuit potentes de sede Et exaltavit humiles.	<i>Aria</i> He hath put down the mighty from their seat and exalted the humble and meek.
<i>Aria</i> Esurientes implevit bonis, Et divites dimisit inanes.	<i>Aria</i> He hath filled the hungry with good things and the rich he hath sent empty away.
<i>Duet</i> Virga Jesse floruit, Emmanuel noster apparuit; Induit carnem hominis, Fit puer delectabilis. Alleluia.	<i>Duet</i> The branch of Jesse has blossomed, our Emmanuel has appeared; he has assumed mortal flesh to become a delightful boy. Alleluia.
<i>Trio</i> Suscepit Israel puerum suum Recordatus misericordiae suae.	<i>Trio</i> He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel:
<i>Chorus</i> Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros, Abraham et semini eius in sæcula.	<i>Chorus</i> As he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever.
<i>Chorus</i> Gloria Patri et Filio Et Spiritui Sancto, Sicut erat in principio et nunc, Et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.	<i>Chorus</i> Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be: world without end. Amen.