A Christmas Oratorio

Minnesota Orchestra

Helmut Rilling, conductor

Julia Sophie Wagner, soprano | Lidia Vinyes-Curtis, mezzo
Nicholas Phan, tenor | Tyler Duncan, baritone

Minnesota Chorale, Kathy Saltzman Romey, artistic director

Holiday Concerts

Saturday, December 9, 2017, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall
Sunday, December 10, 2017, 2 pm | Orchestra Hall

Johann Sebastian Bach  
*Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248*

Cantata I: On the First Day of the Festival of Christmas  
(The Nativity)

Cantata II: On the Second Day of the Festival of Christmas  
(The Annunciation to the Shepherds)

INTERMISSION  ca. 20'

Johann Sebastian Bach  
*Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248*

Cantata III: On the Third Day of the Festival of Christmas  
(The Adoration of the Shepherds)

ca. 30'

Text and translation appears in an insert; translation will also be projected as surtitles.

The performance on Sunday, December 10, will be broadcast live on stations of Classical Minnesota Public Radio, including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.
Soprano Julia Sophie Wagner debuts with the Minnesota Orchestra in these performances. Known for specializing in the vocal works of J. S. Bach, she has worked closely with the great Bach specialist Helmuth Rilling for the past decade. She has also worked with renowned orchestras including the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Munich Chamber Orchestra, Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin, RTVE Madrid, RAI Torino and National Symphony Orchestra, as well as with leading Baroque ensembles. Her performance of Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis at the Kennedy Center was voted the number one Kennedy Center Event of 2014 by Washington Life Magazine. She has won several national and international competitions and earned scholarships from the DAAD (German Government) and the Leipzig Opera, where she has been featured in several productions. More: juliasophiewagner.de.

Barcelona native Lidia Vinyes-Curtis, now making her Minnesota Orchestra debut, sings regularly on major concert and opera stages worldwide, from Madrid and Paris to Moscow and Hong Kong. She has often been a soloist under Helmuth Rilling’s direction since the 2013 Bachakademie Stuttgart. Other conductors she has worked with include Martin Gester, Kay Johannsen, Philippe Pierlot, Jordi Savall and Sigiswald Kuijken. Her recent and upcoming engagements include singing Bach repertoire at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and in Japan; a performance of Massenet’s Thaïs alongside Plácido Domingo at Madrid’s Teatro Real; and performances with the Spanish National Orchestra, Barcelona Symphony Orchestra and BBC Orchestra, with which she is recording Granados’ Goyescas for Harmonia Mundi. She began her musical studies in violin, earning high honors at top conservatories in Spain and France, and later played violin professionally in Baroque orchestras. More: biamartists.com, lidiavinyescurtis.com.

German conductor Helmuth Rilling, who last appeared with the Minnesota Orchestra in April 2016 for performances of Brahms’ German Requiem, is one of the world’s leading interpreters of choral-orchestral music. He has toured internationally, collaborating with the world’s foremost orchestras, and he has founded numerous ensembles and music festivals including the Gächinger Kantorei, Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart and Oregon Bach Festival. The first to record Bach’s complete cantatas, Rilling guided a project to record a 172-disc cycle of Bach’s entire compositional output. His extensive recording repertoire on television, radio and disc has been recognized with a Grammy Award and additional Grammy nominations. In 2015 he published a book about Handel’s Messiah that was co-authored by Kathy Saltzman Romey, choral adviser to the Minnesota Orchestra. Among his many honors, he has been awarded the Stauffer Gold Medal, the Herbert von Karajan Music Prize and the ECHO Klassik Award. More: opus3artists.com, helmuth-rilling.de.

**Bach: Christmas Oratorio**

The Christmas season of 1734–35 in Leipzig, Germany, included a multi-day unveiling of newly-composed music by Bach that we now know as the Christmas Oratorio. Each of its six cantatas was designated for a specific day spanning Christmas and the Epiphany, and together the set forms the narrative of the birth of Christ through the arrival of the Wise Men. These concerts feature the first three cantatas. In the first, the orchestra, choir and soloists jubilantly celebrate the birth of Christ with regal chorale melodies and arias, punctuated by the addition of trumpets and drums. The second cantata, marking the Angel’s announcement to the shepherds, opens with a pastoral orchestral sinfonia—the only one of its kind that Bach includes in the oratorio. Elation is apparent in the third cantata as brilliant choruses and trumpet fanfares depict the shepherds’ adoration of the newborn King.
Tyler Duncan, baritone

Tyler Duncan, now in his first appearance with the Minnesota Orchestra, has performed on the concert stage with many major orchestras worldwide, most recently debuting with Milwaukee Symphony and the Baroque Chamber Orchestra of Colorado. He has performed with the Metropolitan Opera as Yamadori in Madama Butterfly and as Fiorello in The Barber of Seville. Other opera engagements have included the American Spoleto Festival, Pacific Opera and Greensboro Opera. His 2017-18 season includes recitals in Houston, New York and Montreal, return engagements with the Toronto Symphony, Toronto’s Tafelmusik and the Calgary Philharmonic, and debuts with Hartford Symphony, National Philharmonic and Ottawa’s National Arts Centre Orchestra. His recordings include the title role in John Blow’s Venus and Adonis, Bach’s St. Matthew Passion with Portland Baroque, Purcell works and Carissimi’s Jepthe with Les Voix Baroque, and a DVD of Messiah with the Montreal Symphony. More: tylerduncan.ca.

Nicholas Phan, tenor

American tenor Nicholas Phan, now making his Minnesota Orchestra debut, has appeared with many leading orchestras including the Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, Chicago Symphony, San Francisco Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra and BBC Symphony, among many others. His opera credits include appearances with the Los Angeles Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Glyndebourne Opera, Maggio Musicale in Florence, Deutsche Oper am Rhein and Frankfurt Opera. Highlights of the current season include a debut with the Orquestra Sinfônica de São Paulo for Britten’s War Requiem with Marin Alsop, and returns to the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Philharmonia Baroque, Philadelphia Orchestra, Chicago Symphony and Toronto Symphony. He serves as artistic director of Collaborative Arts Institute of Chicago’s Collaborative Works Festival and guest artistic director of the Laguna Beach Music Festival. His most recent solo album is Gods and Monsters, released on Avie Records last January. More: opus3artists.com, nicholas-phan.com.

Minnesota Chorale

Kathy Saltzman Romey, artistic director

Barbara Brooks, accompanist and artistic advisor

The Minnesota Chorale, the Minnesota Orchestra’s principal chorus since 2004, is now in its 23rd season under the leadership of Kathy Saltzman Romey. Founded in 1972, the Chorale is the state’s preeminent symphonic chorus, performing regularly with both this Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Among the Chorale’s initiatives are the acclaimed Bridges program, the Minneapolis Youth Chorus, Men in Music for high-school boys and InChoir for adults. More: mnchorale.org.
in the 18th century, the town of Leipzig celebrated the birth of Jesus and the events surrounding it not with a single feast day, but with a “season” of six special commemorations occurring between Christmas Day and the Feast of the Epiphany. These were the birth of Jesus (December 25), the announcement to the shepherds by a host of angels (December 26), the adoration of the baby by the shepherds (December 27), the circumcision and naming of Jesus (New Year’s Day), the coming of the Magi from the East to find the child “born King of the Jews” (the Sunday after New Year’s Day), and finally the Magi’s worship with their gifts (January 6). On each of these six days near the mid-1730s, Johann Sebastian Bach’s congregation was filled with inspiration by a cantata that recounted one of these stories, commenting and reflecting upon the events and their meanings for the Christian individual and community.

The compiler of the libretto remains unknown, but most scholars believe that Christian Friedrich Henrici (under the pseudonym Picander), a German poet and the librettist for many of Bach’s Leipzig cantatas, probably gathered and arranged the texts.

Bach had already composed virtually all of his cantatas when he came to assemble the Christmas Oratorio. In fact, many of the movements are paraphrases from two earlier secular cantatas dating from 1733, the year before he produced the Christmas Oratorio. Because of this, it is difficult to judge the extent to which Bach viewed the work as an entity. However, one might point to the unifying aspect of the same chorale used in the first and last cantatas. Equally convincing is the fact that all of the opening choruses are composed in triple meter—an understood symbol of the Holy Trinity—and the oratorio commences and concludes in D major. Yet, there is no one consistent structural pattern uniting these cantatas. Five of them begin with a rousing major-key chorus, and one with a sinfonia. All but one end with a chorale, but there is no homogeneity in their presentation, ranging from the unadorned four-part setting of the fifth to the resplendent, chorale-fantasia of the sixth.

Today's concert features the first, second and third cantatas of the Christmas Oratorio, thus condensing three days of celebration, as Bach's original audience would have experienced this music, into a single performance.

the cantatas in brief
On the First Day of the Festival of Christmas (The Nativity). The opening chorus of the Christmas Oratorio is a paraphrase, taken from the secular birthday cantata for Maria Josepha, Queen of Poland and Electress, BWV 214, from which Bach subsequently parodied a number of movements for the oratorio. The text for the original chorus called upon drums, trumpets and strings to fill the air. Bach's transformation of this material to wonderful and idiomatic Christmas music is a marvel. The opening chorus begins with the drums and is followed up by a mighty rush with the strings and winds to the dazzling entrance of the trumpets. Surrounded by two oboes d’amore, the mezzo recitative expresses contentment with the impending birth, leading us to the first aria, a paraphrase from BWV 213, a cantata originally composed for the House of Saxony. The original text, a denunciation of lust and the serpents of sin, now becomes a call to action: prepare yourself Zion, to behold the fairest.

The first and final chorales of the oratorio are a setting of the Passion chorale, which we usually associate with Lent. However, Bach’s congregations would have been familiar with it as it exists in previously-heard cantatas. The movement that follows for bass soloist and the sopranos of the choir is among one of the most interesting movements in Bach’s entire cantata canon. Bach gives the sopranos four chorale phrases, each in a different key, and each is preceded and followed by an instrumental ritornello framing the entire movement. Furthermore, the chorale statements are extended by the bass’s additional explanatory comment. This unique hybrid structure leads us to the powerful bass aria, another paraphrase from BWV 214, whose original form was a song of homage to the queen. A wonderful and grand setting of Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her (From heaven
above to earth I come), with trumpets and drums punctuating each cadence, ends the first cantata.

On the Second Day of the Festival of Christmas (The Annunciation to the Shepherds). This is the only one of the six Christmas Oratorio cantatas not to begin with a celebratory chorus but rather with an expansive sinfonia. With the oboes as shepherds accompanied by flutes and strings as the heavenly choir of angels, the gently undulating dotted rhythms shape a lush, pastoral effect.

The Evangelist then paints the picture of the shepherds in the fields when the Angel of the Lord appears. The unsophisticated, yet beautiful chorale Brich an, o schönes Morgenlicht (Break forth, o lovely light of morning) contemplates the child’s radiance. Two short recitatives act as a bridge to the first aria of the cantata, the first accompanied by strings and the second by the oboe choir. In the first the Angel, encompassed by a halo of sustained strings, announces the birth of the savior. The bass, backed by emphasizing woodwind chords, brings a reminder of the ancient promise. The tenor and flute aria is a call for them to gather, hasten and see for themselves the child who can refresh both body and spirit, as depicted by sweeping melismas (multiple notes extending the same syllable) in the voice and flute.

The Evangelist then describes the infant Jesus in the manger. The chorale tune Vom Himmel hoch (From heaven above), one of the most beloved of the chorales, paints a darkish picture of the child in the gloomy stable where oxen once fed setting the scene for the gorgeous slumber aria for mezzo, flute and strings. Notice how the flute hovers above the mezzo voice like a halo. The chorus then sings, without instrumental introduction, the energetic “Glory to God” chorus. There are two stunning moments when “peace on earth” is called for, compelling the choir to sing in hushed tones while the primarily eighth-note-driven continuo line temporarily subsides. The section ends with Vom Himmel hoch, this time accompanied by motives from the opening sinfonia.

On the Third Day of the Festival of Christmas (The Adoration of the Shepherds). The third cantata completes the narrative wherein the shepherds and others hasten to the manger, extolling Jesus’ powers. It begins with a brilliant chorus, again recycled from an earlier secular cantata, with trumpets and drums. The Evangelist tells of the shepherds making their way to Bethlehem. These words are encapsulated in the following chorus, less fully orchestrated and even shorter than the first. One of Bach’s typically energized bass lines suggests determination while the flowing flute and violin melody intimates a flurry of activity.

A rather lengthy contemplative section follows. The first of the three plainly harmonized chorales Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ