CCM’s Staged St. Matthew Passion a First in the Midwest
Bach’s masterpiece is recreated in a rare staged performance
on November 20 at St. Peter in Chains Cathedral in Cincinnati.

CINCINNATI, Ohio—The University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) Chamber Choir, Philharmonia Orchestra and Cincinnati Children’s Choir combine for an afternoon featuring one of the timeless masterworks of choral music: J.S. Bach’s St. Matthew Passion. This massive staged undertaking, the first of its kind in the Midwest, will be held at St. Peter in Chains Cathedral (Eighth and Plum Street, Downtown Cincinnati) at 1:30 p.m. on Sunday, November 20.

Known for its stunning choruses, interplay between recitative and aria and sublime storytelling, Bach’s St. Matthew Passion has made an enduring mark in music history as a monumental example of a musical setting of the passion story. Thanks in part to a grant from the Tangeman Sacred Music Center, CCM’s production comes to life in a unique staged performance, illuminating the dramatic intensity of the piece and portraying the modern concerns of secular versus sacred.

To make this conflict between faith and religion vivid for today’s audience, the production divides the main role of the Evangelist between two tenors, who alternate scenes to argue over how to best tell the story of the crucifixion to their audience in Cincinnati. The first Evangelist is a televangelist who comes to question how he expresses his faith. The second is a prisoner on Ohio’s death row—a prisoner of his own beliefs and the production. Each aria soloist interrupts the narrative to actively respond to an aspect of the story. The choruses and orchestras are equally active players in the performance and participate in the staging.

The Chamber Choir, Philharmonia Orchestra and Cincinnati Children’s Choir are joined by faculty artist William McGraw, baritone as Jesus and student vocalists as the Evangelists (Ian McEuen and Shawn Mlynek, tenors), Pilate (John McCarthy, baritone), and aria singers (Holly Cameron and Abigail Santos, sopranos; Kate Wakefield, mezzo-soprano; Eric Jurenas, countertenor; Ian Ramirez, tenor; Wesley Brax, baritone, and Derrell Acon, bass-baritone). This unique and inspirational presentation of St. Matthew Passion is directed by Jennifer Williams, a second year artist diploma candidate in opera stage direction. CCM Professor of Music and Director of Choral Studies Earl Rivers conducts.

CCM and St. Matthew Passion
CCM has a long history with J.S. Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, which was previously produced with Earl Rivers, conductor, at Knox Presbyterian Church on November 19, 2006; at St. Peter in Chains Cathedral on November 19, 2000; and at Old St. George’s Church in Corryville on November 24, 1996. Elmer Thomas, Professor Emeritus, conducted St. Matthew Passion at St. Peter in Chains Cathedral on November 12, 1989; at CCM on February 18 and 19, 1983 (repeated as a Lecture-Demonstration at the American Choral Directors Association national conference in Nashville, Tenn. on March 11, 1983); on November 3 and 4, 1977 (repeated at Covington’s Cathedral Basilica on November 6, 1977); and on February 15, 1970, with CCM alumna Kathleen Battle singing the aria, “Aus liebe.”

About St. Matthew Passion
Johann Sebastian Bach's St. Matthew Passion was first heard in 1727 at the Good Friday Vespers in St. Thomas Church, Leipzig. Bach made numerous revisions, some as late as 1740. After Bach’s death in 1750, this masterwork was not heard again until 1829, when Felix Mendelssohn discovered it, was awed by it and performed it. The "Bach Revival," or reawakening of appreciation of Bach's artistic legacy, can be dated from this time.

St. Matthew Passion is set for two choirs, plus children’s or treble choir, two orchestras and two continuo groups. This scoring underlines the solemnity of the work and projects the grand dimensions of Bach's conception of this Passion setting. St. Matthew Passion is also meditative, devotional and perhaps even mystical. An example of this quality can be heard in the way Bach set the words of Jesus – always accompanied by a halo of strings.

The elements of St. Matthew Passion can be viewed in three groups: recitatives and turba (crowd) choruses based on the scriptural text of the Gospel of St. Matthew; arias, ariosi, and reflective choruses based on poetic texts; and chorales (hymns). Bach organized the scriptural narrative in scenes or tableaus, each episode ending with a reflective aria or chorale.
Although the majority of performances of *St. Matthew Passion* are not staged, there are a few notable staged performances in recent history. These include the Berliner Philharmoniker (Simon Rattle, conductor, Peter Sellars, stage director), in New York City at Brooklyn Academy of Music and in London.

CCM’s production is believed to be the first staged presentation in the Midwestern United States.

**About St. Peter in Chains Cathedral**

Saint Peter in Chains is the cathedral of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati. It is a Greek revival structure located at 8th and Plum Streets in downtown Cincinnati. Saint Peter in Chains was begun with the laying of its cornerstone on 20 May 1841, under the direction of then-bishop (later archbishop) John Baptist Purcell, and formally dedicated on 2 November 1845. Its striking single spire, which soars to two hundred and twenty feet above street level, was the tallest man-made structure in the city for many decades, and is constructed of pure white limestone.

The large stone angels that were on each side of the main altar were created by Odoardo Fantacchiotti in the late 1840s. They now grace the Cincinnati Art Museum's Cincinnati wing. They were among the first European sculptures to come to Cincinnati.

The interior of Saint Peter in Chains is distinctly unique among Roman Catholic cathedrals in America, with its Greek-themed mosaics depicting the Stations of the Cross, its ornate Corinthian columns and its massive bronze doors. The crucifix was made by Benvenuto Cellini, the murals by Carl Zimmerman and the mosaic in the apse is by Anton Wendling.

**Ticket Information**

Tickets are $15 pre-concert general admission, $20 day-of concert, $5 non-UC students and UC students are free. Tickets can be purchased by contacting the CCM Box Office (online at ccm.uc.edu or 513-556-4183).

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University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music

**ST. MATTHEW PASSION**

Composed by J.S. Bach
Libretto by Picander
Earl Rivers, conductor
Jennifer Williams, director

**Performance Date:**
Sunday, November 20, 1:30 p.m.

**Location:**
St. Peter in Chains Cathedral
Eighth and Plum Street, downtown Cincinnati

**Tickets:**
$15 pre-concert general admission
$20 day-of concert
$5 non-UC students
UC students free

*CCM Season Presenting Sponsor: The Otto M. Budig Family Foundation*

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