



Matthew Larkin
Music Director

January 27, 2010
For immediate release

**Matthew Larkin and the Ottawa Choral Society present J.S. Bach's monumental
St. Matthew Passion on Sunday March 14th in the sacred space of St. Joseph's Church**

The Boys of the Choir of Christ Church Cathedral, The Larkin Singers (professional chamber choir), a solo cast of six brilliant early music specialists, two organists and a double orchestra composed of the musicians of the Ottawa Music Company join the 110-voice Choral Society to recount the Gospel story in Bach's compelling liturgical drama

Ottawa, Canada: Christian churches first began to observe Holy Week in the Middle Ages setting unembellished Bible verses to simple chant to retell the story of Christ's crucifixion. On Good Friday 1727, five hundred years later, the St. Matthew Passion that Bach offered up had evolved into something that more resembled a "liturgical opera," its Baroque bravura theatricality sending a bolt of lightning through the unsuspecting Lutheran clergy and congregation gathered in Leipzig's Thomaskirche. Although it is known that Bach himself believed his St. Matthew Passion to be his finest achievement, the greatest music ever written sank into obscurity to linger a hundred years until Felix Mendelssohn came along and resurrected the immortal masterpiece.

Bach undoubtedly had his champions in the intervening years, for no less a figure than Beethoven was known to have cleverly punned on the composer's name (which means 'brook' in German): "Why," he said, "he should not be called 'Brook' but 'Ocean'!" In our own time, Bach's Mass in B minor is considered by modern interpreters to be only the *second* greatest composition in Western music. Seiji Ozawa says, "The greatest, is without a doubt, the St. Matthew Passion." And when asked who are his two favourite contemporary composers, Montreal Symphony Orchestra conductor, Kent Nagano, echoes Ozawa's reverence. "Bach and Mozart. A masterpiece is eternally contemporary".

On **Sunday, March 14th** at 2:30 pm, [please note the new date] Matthew Larkin assembles the dramatis personae for a rare presentation of Bach's **St. Matthew Passion**. Joining the 110-voice Ottawa Choral Society will be the Christ Church Cathedral Boys Choir; his Toronto-based professional chamber choir, The Larkin Singers; a cast of six of this generation's most gifted early music specialists; two prominent organists; and a double orchestra composed of the leading musicians of the Ottawa Music Company. The performance, in the acoustically splendid St. Joseph's Church, will be a major event in Ottawa's choral calendar — a performance for which listeners should brace themselves for a harrowing emotional and spiritual journey.

The St. Matthew Passion epitomizes Bach's genius for musical architecture, sound imagery and characterization. The Evangelist is cast as the narrator who guides us through the action of the drama, and to each of the principal players – Jesus, Judas, Peter, the High Priest and Pontius Pilate – he has given arias of intimate tenderness and abrasive power through which they reveal themselves. He has configured his choral forces into three choruses, one of those divided into eight parts, and employs them variously as confounded commentators, or places them at the foot of the Cross as the riotous, hostile mob. Throughout, he harkens back again and again to the chorale melodies of the Lutheran liturgy. Reiterated in complex re-harmonizations and interspersed throughout the work's seventy-eight

settings of the texts, the chorales are the foundation of the tragic action, setting the tone and creating a montage of voices and perspectives.

Soloists will include the renowned Canadian tenor **Michiel Schrey** as the Evangelist. Well-known to Ottawa concertgoers, and Matthew Larkin's favourite Evangelist, Michiel's career has taken him across Canada as well as to the United States, Mexico and Europe. He performs a wide variety of music, from sacred works and opera of the Baroque and Classical eras to contemporary music and 19th century repertoire. The *National Post* (Toronto) has called him "a magnetic presence" while the *Edmonton Journal* praised his "wonderfully consistent, ringing tone." *Opera Canada* magazine described his voice as having both "elegance and the requisite tenorial fire."

Juno-nominated soprano **Shannon Mercer**, a glowing voice in the Canadian musical world, returns to sing the many beautiful arias given to the Passion's female characters. Admiration for Ms. Mercer's work is universal. Reviewing a recent performance of Messiah in Toronto, the *Toronto Star* said, "The standout was soprano Shannon Mercer, who not only has a luminous lyric voice, but who sings every word as if she truly means it. She made us want to rejoice greatly, and we were convinced that her redeemer really is alive." (*Toronto Star*, 17 December 2009) Shannon's award-winning discography includes several releases on the Analekta label: the 2009 JUNO Award recipient *Gloria! : Vivaldi's Angels*, the JUNO nominated *Bach and the Liturgical Year, Mondonville*, and *English Fancy*. Her next CD for Analekta featuring the music of early Italian composer Francesca Caccini has just been released.

Canada is home to several of the world's finest counter-tenors, and on this occasion the choir is pleased to introduce the newest rising star in that firmament, **Daniel Cabena**. A gold-medal winner and a winner of the Guelph Spring Festival competition, Daniel already has an impressive performance profile and has been invited to sing under the baton of many of Canada's leading choral directors, including Lydia Adams, Lawrence Beckwith, David Fallis and Noel Edison.

The choir also welcomes back two of its favourite artists: tenor **Nils Brown** and baritone **Sean Watson**. **Nils Brown** is a distinguished solo performer in oratorio, opera and ensemble. Major orchestras and choral organizations in Canada, USA and Great Britain regularly engage him, including the American Bach Soloists and the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York City where he did an avant-garde production of the St. Matthew Passion staged as an opera by the celebrated director Jonathan Miller. Nils gave an electrifying performance in the Choral Society's 2004 production of Handel's Saul. He was last heard with the OCS in Mozart's Grand Mass in C Minor in May 2009.

Baritone **Sean Watson** is enjoying parallel careers as both oratorio soloist and on the opera stage. He has sung throughout North America, Europe and the Middle East. Recent performances include The Bonze in *Madama Butterfly* with Opera Hamilton, the title role in *The Mikado* with Toronto Operetta Theatre, and John Estacio's *The Houses Stand Not Far Apart* with Chorus Niagara and the Orpheus Choir. Sean's contributions to the Choral Society's 2003 presentation of Haydn's Creation reflected his great musical intelligence and sensitivity to text. His interpretation of the Passion's beautiful bass aria "Mach Dich" is certain to be one of the most memorable moments of the performance.

Making his debut appearance with the OCS is the American bass-baritone **Sumner Thompson** in the role of Christ. Hailed as "the real thing" (*Cleveland Plain Dealer*) and praised for his "elegant style" (*Boston Globe*), he has performed across North America as a soloist with Concerto Palatino, Tafelmusik, Apollo's Fire, Les Boreades de Montréal, Les Voix Baroques, Pacific Baroque Orchestra, the King's Noyse, Mercury Baroque, and the symphonies of Charlotte, Memphis, and Phoenix. He also

sang the role of Jesus in Bach's St. Matthew Passion with Joshua Rifkin and the Cambridge Concertus in their tour of Japan.

Also joining the choir will be the **Christ Church Cathedral Boys' Choir** who, last summer, had the honour of being invited to serve as choir-in-residence at Britain's magnificent Ely Cathedral and were also invited to perform in St. Paul's Cathedral in London under the direction of Matthew Larkin.

The Larkin Singers is a professional choir, led by Founding Director Matthew Larkin, that specializes in sacred music from the Anglican tradition. Ontario's newest professional chamber choir, the ensemble was formed in the summer of 2008 by sixteen choral singers who have extensive backgrounds in church music, either in boys' choirs, children's choirs, mixed choirs, or as professional adults. Their experience spans several different Christian denominations and traditions and is rooted in a deep and abiding love of church music.

The Choral Society is delighted to continue its fruitful collaboration with the leading musicians of the **Ottawa Music Company** who will form the double orchestra. Organists Marie Bouchard and James Calkin will join the ensemble at two organ consoles.



Michiel Schrey



Shannon Mercer



Daniel Cabena



Nils Brown



Sean Watson



Sumner Thompson

Matthew Larkin, conductor

Soloists: Michiel Schrey, tenor

Shannon Mercer, Soprano

Daniel Cabena, counter-tenor

Nils Brown, tenor

Sean Watson, baritone

Sumner Thompson, baritone

Christ Church Cathedral Boys Choir

The Larkin Singers

The Ottawa Music Company

Marie Bouchard and James Calkin, organists

St. Joseph's Church, (corner of Wilbrod at Cumberland, Ottawa)

Sunday, March 14, 2010; 2:30 pm

Tickets \$48 reserved; \$37 general; \$15 students; children 12 and under free.

Two-concert packages with full subscriber discounts and benefits are on sale now.

Group discounts are available.

Tickets:

Online and at citywide locations: www.ottawachoralsociety.com

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