

BACH BIRTHDAY BASH

JAMES KENNERLEY

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SATURDAY, MARCH 25, 2023 • 7 PM



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The mighty **Kotschmar Organ** is one of the grandest and most celebrated pipe organs in the world. It is one of only two municipal organs in the United States, harnessing incredible power and range that “wows” musicians and audiences alike.

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The Kotschmar has a long and fascinating history, beginning with its construction in 1912 in what was then known as Portland City Hall Auditorium. Today, “the king of instruments” is a treasured fixture of Merrill Auditorium that inspires awe in people of all ages, near and far.

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Welcome!

Welcome to this concert celebrating the 338th birthday of the High Priest of the pipe organ: Johann Sebastian Bach. Born into a humble, extended family of professional musicians, Bach did not receive the kind of education that would allow him to quickly ascend the ranks. Instead, he absorbed the music that was available to him, voraciously studying, copying, and performing. This process of learning continued throughout Bach's life, and he was remarkably open to new ideas—despite being criticized by some of his colleagues for being too conservative.

This concert aims to show some of those developments, from his first major post as music director at the Weimar court—where he would combine the North German tradition with the Italianate concerto form—to his final decades at the St. Thomas Church, Leipzig, where his supreme prowess as a composer of counterpoint would continue to define his reputation to this day.

Bach's music is a reminder to us all of the seminal importance of classical music. The immense power of listening to a live, acoustic performance is tangible. How is it that music written centuries ago, played on an instrument constructed in 1912, can be so moving, profound, or joyful? Part of that is because music is a living art: it only comes alive when it is performed in real time. Another reason is that music—particularly Bach's music—speaks directly to the soul. It's hard to pinpoint precisely how or why, even though many have tried, but perhaps that's not the point.

Thank you for being here and sharing in this most special of birthday performances performed on one of the great treasures of the American pipe organ tradition.

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BACH BIRTHDAY BASH

Merrill Auditorium - Portland, Maine

Saturday, March 25, 7 p.m.

JAMES KENNERLEY, municipal organist

Tocatta in F major, BWV 540 Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1750)

Three chorale preludes on *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* ("Savior of the nations, come") J.S. Bach

À 2 clavier et pédale, BWV 659

Trio a due bassi e canto fermo, BWV 660

In organo pleno/il canto fermo nel pedale, BWV 661

Organ Concerto in G Major after Johann Ernst Prinz von Sachsen Weimar, BWV 592 J.S. Bach

[Allegro assai]

Grave

[Presto e staccato]

Prelude and Fugue in G major, BWV 550 J.S. Bach

Intermission

Fantasia super *Komm, Heiliger Geist* ("Come, Holy Ghost"), BWV 651 J.S. Bach

Chorale prelude on *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele* ("Adorn yourself, O dear soul"), BWV 654 J.S. Bach

Prelude and fugue in B minor, BWV 544 J.S. Bach

Air from Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D major ("Air on the G string"), BWV 1068 J.S. Bach
trans. James Kennerley
(b. 1984)

Sinfonia from *Wir danken dir, Gott* ("We Thank You, God"), BWV 29 J.S. Bach
trans. J. Kennerley

Program Notes

The concert features original organ works by Bach, including the massive Toccata in F major, which features two extended—and highly virtuosic—solos for the feet alone. It opens with a pedal point (so-called because it is played by the feet, on the pedal keyboard of the organ) over which Bach weaves an energetic *moto perpetuo* sixteenth-note invention. Despite (and perhaps because of) these strongly identified areas of tonality, Bach modulates to far-flung keys (including a brief appearance of G-flat major, worlds away from the home key of F major) as a means of creating harmonic tension and release.

The Prelude and Fugue in G major was probably written during Bach's Weimar period (1708-1717). As such, it stands as a relatively early attempt at writing an extended organ work. It brims with energy from beginning to end and demonstrates clear influences from Bach's mentor, Dietrich Buxtehude, and the Northern European *stylus fantasticus*. It is contrasted, in the second half, with a mature work, the Prelude and Fugue in B minor, which was probably composed during Bach's time in Leipzig (1723-1750). The prelude is moody and dramatic, and stands in compliment to the more restrained, concerto-influenced fugue with which it is paired. It is one of the few major Bach organ works for which we have a copy in the composer's hand (the great majority exist only in copies by his sons and pupils).

The chorale—a hallmark of Lutheran worship and sacred music—was intrinsic to Bach's life and work. Bach's sacred cantatas (some 200 odd survive, though he composed over 300) are all based on chorales. Strophic in design and sung to vernacular texts, they are entirely Luther's creation, and still define Lutheran worship to this day. Organ treatments, either as chorale preludes or improvisations, existed in both improvised and written forms. Bach left as many as fifty chorale settings for organ before 1707 from his time at his first church appointment, St. Blasius Church in Mühlhausen.

During the final decade of his life, Bach revisited some of the large-scale chorale-based organ works written during his time in Weimar. Also known as the Leipzig or Great Eighteen chorale preludes, these extended works are greatly varied in style, and may be compared in scope to a later keyboard undertaking, *Das wohltemperierte Klavier* (*The Well-Tempered Clavier*), two sets of preludes and fugues in every major and minor key (48 in total) that Bach composed during his time at the court in Köthen. Speaking of his father and his Weimar employer, Bach's son Emmanuel noted that "His grace's delight in his playing

fired him [Bach] to attempt everything possible in the art of how to treat the organ." The five works taken from this collection this evening include three settings of the Advent chorale, "Nun komm, der heiden Heiland," in three contrasting styles.

The first is in the form of a highly ornamented cantus firmus (chorale melody) accompanied by an instrumental-style walking bass that one may well expect to see represented in the slow movement of an Italianate concerto. The second is in the form of a trio, where the feet and the two hands perform distinctive and independent musical lines that are woven together with a clear nod to the Vivaldian concerto ritornello style.

The third presents the chorale melody in the pedals over which a massive toccata is developed. This musical material is ingeniously derived from figures of the chorale itself, presented at times in inversion (the musical equivalent of upside down). Such compositional techniques were very much part of Bach's modus operandi, and characteristic of his contrapuntal genius. A similar technique is used for the large-scale fantasia on "Komm, Heiliger Geist" ("Come, Holy Ghost"), a melody and text associated with the Christian feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is sent down to the disciples of Jesus accompanied by a mighty rush of wind. Accordingly, the melody, presented in the pedals and combined with an independent bass line, is accompanied by a toccata figuration in the hands that spins outwards from the opening theme. In contrast, the chorale prelude on "Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele" ("Adorn yourself, O dear soul") stands as one of Bach's most sublime instrumental works, cast as it is in the style of a sarabande.

Bach frequently made organ transcriptions of instrumental works by other composers—as we hear in this program with the transcription of Italian-style instrumental concerto by Prinz Johann Ernst, Bach's first employer in Weimar. The concerto constitutes the typical three-movement plan. The original is scored for five violins, viola, cello, and continuo. Fascinatingly, Bach takes more liberties to "improve" the music of his employer in these transcriptions than he does in similar transcriptions for organ by a master such as Antonio Vivaldi. The music is, in a word, delightful.

We will also enjoy two transcriptions of orchestral works by Bach. The first is drawn from the third orchestral suite, composed for the court orchestra at Köthen. The Prince, Bach's employer, was a music lover but also a Calvinist. Those religious convictions restricted the presence of elaborate church music at the court, and so Bach turned to

instrumental music as his primary form of composition. He had an excellent professional orchestra to work with and produced among many items the four overtures (now known as the Orchestral Suites) between the years 1724-1731. The third of these, in D major, features an Air (originally the term for a sung piece) for strings that became famous as the "Air on a G string" after a nineteenth-century arrangement by German violinist August Wilhelmj. The name derives from the fact that Wilhelmj transposed the piece down in such a way that the upper part can be played by the violins on their lowest string, the G string.

The concert concludes with another transcription I made of the celebratory Sinfonia to Bach's Cantata 29, *Wir danken dir*. These two works allow the wide range of orchestral sounds and the extraordinary power of the Kotzschmar organ to be exploited in full force!

James Kennerley, 2023



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JAMES KENNERLEY, *municipal organist*

Hailed as “a great organist” displaying “phenomenal technique and sheer musicality” (Bloomberg News), James Kennerley is a multi-faceted musician, working as a conductor, keyboardist, singer, and composer. His performances are known for their illustrious flair and thrilling virtuosity, subtlety and finesse, drawing on the full resources of the instrument. James’ YouTube performances have enjoyed worldwide popularity and millions of views globally. His concert engagements this season take him to Boston’s Symphony Hall, Montreal’s Maison Symphonique, an international tour to Rome, Florence, and Venice, and even Fenway Park!

In 2019, James was named Director of Music at Saint Paul’s Church, Harvard Square, presiding over the world-famous choir of men and boys. He was appointed the Municipal Organist of Portland, Maine, in 2017, following a unanimous vote from the Search Committee and the City Council. A native of the United Kingdom, he has held Organist and Choirmaster positions at Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church, New York City and the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Times Square. He is also part of a team of musicians at Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City, one of the foremost centers of Jewish Music and Liturgy in the world. Mr. Kennerley made his Carnegie Hall solo debut in 2016 with the celebrated ensemble the Sejong Soloists. Performances last season included concerts at Alice Tully Hall, the Frick Collection, the Metropolitan Museum’s MetLiveArts series, and in the Lincoln Center

White Light Festival. He has also given concerts at Washington National Cathedral, Saint Patrick's Cathedral, Princeton University, the Royal Albert Hall, Saint Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and other major venues throughout the United States and Europe. He was a featured artist on recordings with the Grammy - nominated Choir of Trinity Wall Street including Handel's *Messiah and Israel in Egypt*, and Monteverdi *Vespers*, as well as a recording of Julian Wachner's *The Snow Lay on the Ground*. Mr. Kennerley was a prizewinner at the 2008 Albert Schweitzer International Organ Competition, and a finalist at the inaugural (2013) Longwood Gardens International Organ Competition.

Mr. Kennerley holds degrees from Cambridge University and The Juilliard School. He has studied the organ with David Sanger, Thomas Trotter, and McNeil Robinson, and harpsichord with Kenneth Weiss, Peter Sykes, and Richard Egarr. He holds the prestigious Fellowship of the Royal College of Organists diploma.



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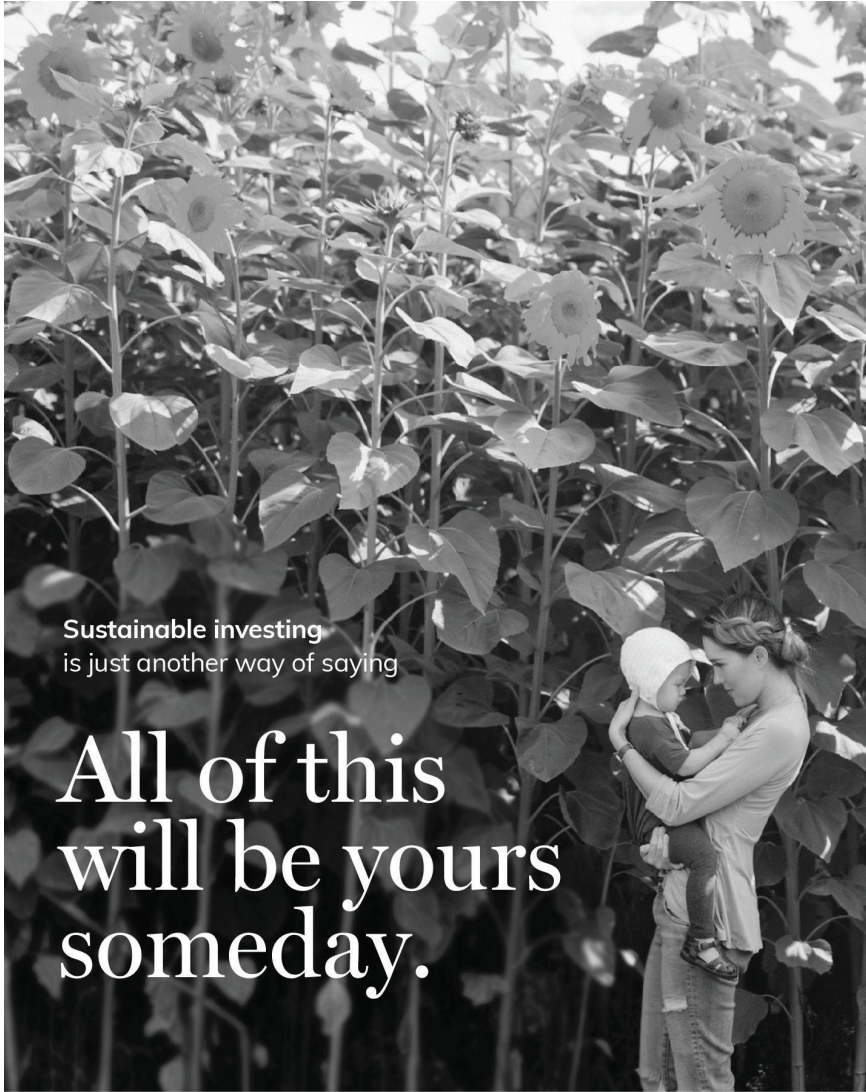
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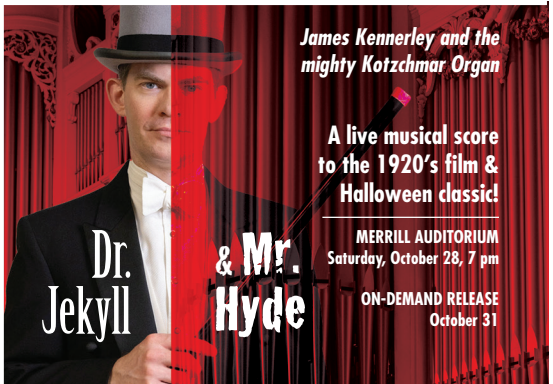
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