

THE EARLIEST COMPLETE PERFORMANCE OF THE ST. MATTHEW PASSION?

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A little-known presentation of the St. Matthew Passion pushes back the date of the first known complete performance of the work since Bach's death by more than thirty years, and places it in London.¹ Further, while the performance did not exclusively employ original scoring, it did come closer to that than any known previous nineteenth-century performance. A copy of the program for the concert, which took place on 25 April 1873, is in the British Library. The concert itself was reviewed in several London newspapers and journals. The conductor was Sir Michael Costa (who was not known for his Bach sympathies), and the choir was the Sacred Harmonic Society. In its review of the occasion, the *Athenaeum* called it an "experiment" and said further that "it may safely be asserted that it will never be repeated; that is, we are never likely to have again upwards of four hours devoted to the execution of the seventy-eight numbers of the original score."²

With regard to the use of early instruments and close-to-original scoring, as opposed to the use of "additional accompaniments," which had been a feature of every previous nineteenth-century performance of the work, the *Athenaeum* implies that it was not because of any particular belief in the use of early instruments on the part of Sir Michael, but because he did not have the necessary time—in his view, years as opposed to months—"properly and reveren-

¹Up to now, it is generally accepted that the first complete performance was by Felix Mottl in 1907, in Karlsruhe. The famous Mendelssohn revival of the work in Berlin in 1829 was of course not complete; nor was the first English performance in 1854 by William Sterndale-Bennett.

²"BACH'S 'GROSSE PASSIONS-MUSIK,'" *Athenaeum* (London) 2375 (May 1873): 574.