TRANSLATIONS

OF THE ADDRESSES DURING THE OPENING CONCERT OF THE 2026 BACHFEST

Thomaskirche

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Hauptförderer des Bachfestes Leipzig 2026 Sparkasse Leipzig

ADDRESS

BY BURKHARD JUNG,
MAYOR OF THE CITY OF LEIPZIG

Dear Music Lovers,
Welcome to the 2026 Leipzig Bachfest!

I am absolutely delighted to see you here today in Leipzig, Bach's home city of many years, for the start of a festival which has grown impressively over the past decades.
Today, I look back fondly on 1999, when the annual Bachfest as we now know it first began. Back then, it was a rather delicate plant that had to be nourished and cared for with great commitment, new, sometimes even crazy ideas, and huge enthusiasm. For a while, it was attended by the tense question of how it would evolve, whether the idea would catch on and whether there would be enthusiasts in sufficient number to travel here year after year, enough interested artists to participate.

Today, we can say that the plant has thrived and has become a tree. The reputation of the Bachfest has long since spread far beyond Leipzig – it has become an international, diverse and living event. It attracts artists from all over the world and an equally international audience. Its force of attraction grows stronger every year – advance ticket sales this year were better than ever before. And so once again, it is set to be a celebration on a grand scale of the music of J. S. Bach and his unfathomable genius.
Because, of course, the festival has not just grown in size. It has also developed in terms of content. Every year, it seeks new answers to the question: what does Bach still have to say to us?

We live in times when so much happens and so much is said simultaneously – and often very fast. Our way of communicating is now digital, possible at any time, frequently loud and sometimes incredibly hasty.
The same applies to music. Not long ago, maybe 25 years ago, one would consciously sit down to listen to a disc, or go to a concert. Today, music often accompanies all things all at the same time – in the background, on the fly, between two items of news.
And it's the same with conversation. The reality is that we live in a world full of voices. But sometimes one gets the impression that, while people talk all the time, they are not necessarily talking to one another. A multitude of voices does not automatically result in comprehension – it can sometimes result in a lack of voice. And we know: sometimes, the pause is the most important in music and conversation.
Genuine dialogue requires time. Attention. The readiness to put up with contradictory voices. And that is why the title of this year's Bachfest, In Dialogue, is so appropriate for our times. Because dialogue is an art.

Johann Sebastian Bach was a most impressive master of that art. We can still, as ever, learn something from him. When one hears his music – precisely his great polyphonic works – one hears how voices can work together. They do not simply »talk« over the top of one another. The voices respond to one another, contradict one another, complement one another, lose one another briefly, then come back together. The fascinating thing is that every voice remains independent. And yet from them arises a single, common whole. It is perhaps that which strikes such a chord with us today.

Because our society too lives by the fact that different voices have their place. Not each in isolation from the other, but in purposeful exchanges with one another.
Bach's music shows that order does not mean everyone doing the same thing. And that freedom does not mean that anything goes. Clear rules and great freedom – both at the same time. Maybe that is one of the reasons why this music seems so modern even today.
This year, we celebrate the dialogue so artfully implicit in Bach's music, not only as the festival title, but as the idea behind the whole programme: a dialogue between eras, interpretations, between artists and audience and between different music traditions. And, hopefully, also between people from all over the world who might not ordinarily get into conversation with one another.
Here, we who think differently, live differently, hear differently come together – and find a common space in J. S. Bach. A space where we can concentrate, exchange views, perhaps sometimes even contradict one another.

Community does not come about spontaneously. It comes about through listening. Tolerating. Discussing. And sometimes also by thrashing out different points of view in a constructive manner. In the end, we hopefully find that the truth of J. S. Bach still prevails! All over the world. Even today.
We will be hearing some excellent international artists in the days ahead. The living force behind this year's programme is the magisterial musicians who make Bach's music sound new every time.
But it is also the dialogue with you, the audience! Many of you certainly took part in the survey of the most popular and most beautiful cantatas – and now the time of revelation has come. The countdown has begun and this year you can hear the Top 50. Masterpieces from number 50 down to number 1 – all magnificently performed by top-notch Bach interpret-ers. It will be a joyous affair. And immensely enjoyable – just like all the other items, large and small, on the programme of the latest, 2026 festival edition.
I wish every one of us an inspiring few days, fruitful discussions, great music – and many moments of genuine listening.
Welcome to the 2026 Leipzig Bachfest.

OPENING ADDRESS

BY PROF. DR. MICHAEL MAUL
BACHFEST ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Distinguished Guests, Bachfest Partners and Sponsors,
Bachians from far and near,

I have to confess that after that breathtaking truel by the three tenors, expressing myself in words is something of a challenge. Because what we have just heard is far more than just a beautiful piece of music. Claudio Monteverdi has just gifted us one of those special moments when music suddenly makes visible something that words alone are scarcely able to express. In the heavens, three seraphim, three of the highest order of angels, glorify their God in strict compliance with the rules of singing – breathless, with intensity and the most passionate virtuosity, as if trying to outdo one another in their song of praise. Then something astonishing occurs. At the very instant when the angels sing of the trinity of God, that of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, they abdicate their individuality. They momentarily set aside all artistry, all virtuosic polyphony; the three voices suddenly become one: »Et hi tres unum sunt«. Therein lies the grandeur of that instant. Not in virtuosity alone, but in the contrast, in the fact that music and words suddenly meld together. Vocal artistry steps back for the sake of expression, to make the text visible, audibly; sound and subject become one.

And I am certain that Johann Sebastian Bach himself would have been equally amazed by that instant. Because he too loved and lived polyphony, the art of conversation in music, in a manner equal to none. In Bach, numerous voices thrash out a subject; they contradict one another, complement one another, compete for the best argument. And yet even in Bach, there are those rare moments when he reins in the art of polyphony and steps back, again for the sake of the text. In eleven days' time, in the closing concert here in St Thomas' Church we will be hearing Bach's B Minor Mass – again sung by the Thomanerchor. There, Bach had to set the words »Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum« to music in the Creed. And what does he do? In a duet, he evokes the consubstantiality of God the Father and Christ the Son. Unlike in Monteverdi, his two singers do not blend together. But like him, in Bach too the voices are absolutely identical. They follow one another, as in a canon. They are inseparably entwined, except that Bach wished the phrasing of one voice to be rather harsh and the other much gentler. A simple but effective stroke of genius – here the strict Father, there the mild Son.
Or again, let us recall the St Matthew Passion and the harrowing scene beneath the Cross. The fired-up crowd mocks Jesus: »He has helped others and cannot help himself!« the onlookers cry. A wild confusion of voices from both choirs, pure scorn in musical form. But then, in the very final bar, at the words »He said: I am the son of God!«, more than 20 voices join as one. They roar in unison at the defenceless Jesus up there on the Cross, all of one fanatical accord. In other words, here, Bach, the god of polyphony, goes so far as to renounce, or rather withhold,

the art so characteristic of him because he wants to make the fanaticism audible. Indeed, at that instant Bach uses musical means to lay bare the dark side of our human nature. He makes audible how powerful, how seductive, but also how dangerous monophony and totalitarianism can be.

And it is for this precise reason, Ladies and Gentlemen, for this precise reason that we made »In Dialogue« the motto of this year's Bachfest.
Because with this Bachfest we want to create spaces for discussion. Under the aegis of Bach's song, we want people to come together – musically, intellectually, simply as human beings, in all kinds of different ways. Of course, at the same time we will continually be confronted with Bach's matchless art of musical dialogue: in his cantatas, his motets, the Clavier-Übungen, and in his truly dialogue-like chamber music. We will hear how Bach's voices talk with one another, argue, console one another, mourn or rejoice together.
But we will also hear him in dialogue with many other composers, as this evening, for example, when he and his Magnificat will dialogue with a whole millennium of church music. The fascinating thing is that Bach was actually an astonishingly sedentary person. He never really left Central Germany; in his youth he travelled no farther than Hamburg and Lübeck. And yet musically he contained the whole of Europe: the musical styles of Italy and France, he knew exactly what was in musical vogue in Paris, London, Vienna and Naples. He knew his Vivaldi, just as he knew his Couperin, Lully and Handel – because he transcribed, performed and sometimes even arranged their works. His whole life long he maintained an imaginary dialogue with Europe's greatest musical masters without ever meeting most of them in person.
And perhaps that too holds an important message for the present time: dialogue does not necessarily require concordance. But it does require curiosity about things foreign to us, about other points of view. It requires respect. And it requires a readiness to listen to one another, with no ifs and buts.
This is why I am especially looking forward to the many encounters our Bachfest makes possible and will extend far beyond the concert podium.

One case in hand: in a few days' time, 120 singers from over 20 nations will be coming together here for the third time now as our »BACH – We are FAMILY« festival choir. In the space of just four days, people from all kinds of backgrounds, of all ages, from all walks of life will be blending together as one choir family, at the end of which, here in St Thomas' Church, they will perform the Bach cantata »Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis« (»I had much grief«), with the emphasis on »had«!
And isn't that a most beautiful metaphor for what music is capable of achieving? The fact that people previously unknown to one another sing, breathe and feel together – and at the same time leave all their everyday cares behind?!
And do you know the best thing about it? This year, the festival choir will be accompanied by a very special ensemble: the Lufthansa Orchestra – pilots, cabin crew members and other employees of our great German airline which celebrates its centenary this year. In other words, the

»BACH – We are FAMILY« choir will be performing with precisely those people whose principal occupation involves ensuring that Bach lovers from all over the world are able to travel to Leipzig to attend the Bachfest year after year. I find that marvellous!
And this year, a very, very large number of visitors had to be transported to Leipzig, more than ever before! As things currently stand, we have already sold – wait for it! – more than one-third more tickets than we ever have done previously. And for that I want to address my explicit thanks to you all, our audience, for having undertaken the trip to Leipzig. People from more than 50 nations. That, too, is a wonderful sign. The 341-year-old gentleman there, beneath the tombstone, is still capable of uniting and delighting us!

But I want to thank you all for a second reason. This Bachfest actually began two years ago. Back then, at the 2024 Bachfest, we asked you: What are your ten favourite Bach cantatas? Which works are really special to you? Because we were looking for the 50 best-loved Bach cantatas for a cycle which now, at the 2026 Bachfest, is set to become a reality.
Many of you took this opportunity to have your say. We received more than 8,000 votes. And so now, or rather tomorrow afternoon to be exact, we can proudly start the countdown in the first cantata hit parade of all time. Here too, it all began with dialogue – with our public. And it has worked fantastically well. Many, many thanks to all those who participated!
And on the subject of dialogue, I'm certain that our great TOP 50 Bach Cantatas cycle will provide plenty of food for discussion in the next few days. Why that particular cantata? Why did that work not make it into the Bach charts? Why is that piece number 1, and not that one? And that is exactly how we imagined it. Suspense right up to the final note and plenty of scope for passionate debate!

Because Bach never wanted to be a museum piece; he never actually was a museum piece. Rather, Bach was and always has been the present. His music is reborn with every performance. It moves us, brings us together, inspires and strengthens us. And this is why at this point I want to thank all our public and private donors from the bottom of my heart: the City of Leipzig, the Free State of Saxony, Sparkasse Leipzig, the Bachfest Patrons, Leipziger Gruppe and many, many more. Thanks to your continuing funding, you allow us to carry on telling the Bach story here in Leipzig once a year, for eleven, packed Bachfest days. Many of our visitors confess to us that the Leipzig Bachfest is their elixir of life, the best Bach self-help group in the world, where they meet like-minded people from all over the world with whom they can marvel at Bach before returning home, inspired. The support of our distinguished partners and sponsors is well-invested. Many thanks!

But to close, I would like to welcome and pay particular tribute to another institution – an institution without which the worldwide Bach festivals would probably never have developed to this extent: the »Neue Bachgesellschaft«. It was founded here in Leipzig in 1900 – on precisely the same day on which the first Bach society (founded in 1850, also here in Leipzig) was dissolved, because it had fulfilled its self-imposed goal of publishing a first complete

edition of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. This new Bach society wished to follow up that idea with another brilliant idea: Bach festivals were to be held annually in different locations – not only to preserve Bach's music, but to make it known the world over among private individuals, in concerts, in towns large and small. To the »Neue Bachgesellschaft« members, to the acting president, Prof. Christfried Brödel, and the president-elect, Dr. Andreas Bomba, I want to say what a huge honour it is to have the oldest of all ›new‹ Bach societies celebrating its one-hundredth Bachfest with us here in Leipzig. It is one more guarantee of what I hope will be auspicious dialogue on all kinds of topics over the next eleven days. The ground has been prepared. On behalf of the whole Bachfest team, I hope your stay in this »pleasant Athens on the Pleisse« is as enjoyable as ever!

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