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# Bach's Winterreise

Each year, Montréal celebrates the music of Bach, courtesy of the Festival Bach de Montréal. Juliette Barber caught up with Festival Director Alexandra Scheibler to reflect on the festival's history and to experience its 2023 edition

Italian contralto Sonia Prina  
Photo © Antoine Saito  
Festival Bach Montréal



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**When Alexandra Scheibler moved from Hamburg (Germany) to Montréal (Canada) in 2001, little did she know that her love and nostalgia for Johann Sebastian Bach would lead her to create an annual festival celebrating his musical genius or that this would earn her the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.**

One Christmas in Montréal, Scheibler was filled with nostalgia for her homeland, missing the Bach performances that are so prevalent in Germany across the festive period. Seeking to resolve this dilemma, Scheibler decided to explore the idea of her own Bach festival, bringing a little piece of Germany to her new home.

A musician (violin and viola) and musicologist by training, Scheibler has always appreciated Montréal's vibrant music scene, with its two symphony orchestras and active Early Music community. However, with few friends in the city, her festival remained a distant dream. The help of fellow German Sabine Pletat proved invaluable, and they embarked on a two-year journey of planning and networking, utilising their local coffee shop as a vibrant "office". In 2005, her dream came to fruition, with the inaugural Festival Bach de Montréal held in November, bringing a sense of Germany to the city.

The festival had a sense of gravitas from the start, attracting distinguished musicians and ensembles such as conductor Frieder Bernius, baritone Klaus Mertens, and the now-disbanded Musica Antiqua Köln directed by Reinhard Goebel. International artists arrived courtesy of their Lufthansa business class flights, a sponsorship deal deftly negotiated by Scheibler. A perusal through past programmes reveals an impressive line-up of international guest artists, including Yo-Yo Ma, Masaaki Suzuki and the Akademie für alte Musik Berlin. "From the beginning, it was clear that musically we were pretty serious, featuring not only international artists and ensembles, but also great, local musicians from Québec," says Scheibler.

The involvement of the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal's (OSM) then Music Director, Kent Nagano, was

a huge help and their continued collaboration (Nagano is a member of the Board) has been a key ingredient of its success. "The OSM's presence was a huge help in garnering support from Québec and Montréal," says Scheibler, alongside her own connections across Europe.

Even during the pandemic, the 2020 festival still went ahead, featuring solely local artists due to travel restrictions. Just before the festival, concert halls in Canada were closed to prevent the spread of the virus, prompting a last-minute change in format, with concerts live-streamed from venues across the city. "We did everything as planned, just with no public," says Scheibler, explaining that she still attended the concerts, "but always alone". The following year, the festival took place during a window when everything was open to the public and the return of international soloists, if not ensembles, was a particular highlight.

Today, the festival takes over the whole city, becoming its classical music heartbeat for a three-week period each November/December. It attracts more than 20,000 local and international festivalgoers, who approach each of the 30-plus events with enthusiasm and general bonhomie.

With concerts, recitals, open rehearsals, discussions and children's events taking place in various locations across Montréal, festivalgoers must be organised to ensure they don't miss any of the festival's hidden gems, including the popular Off-Festival Bach. This free event, held in downtown Montréal near Place des Arts, provides an opportunity to "be curious" and often features appearances by international artists from the main festival. During my time at the festival last year, I was struck by the convivial atmosphere and joined my peers with delight in the appearance of international artists "dropping in for 20 minutes or so [to attend performances], allowing the public to get closer to the artists and the music". This, too, is where you'll find the festival team, "hanging out in this nice, cosy place with a glass of wine, a coffee or a cheese plate."





Each year, an international guest conductor is invited to work with the Bach Festival Orchestra, which is composed of musicians from the OSM, local orchestras and young, upcoming musicians. For the 2023 edition, the orchestra was joined by German pianist and guest soloist Schaghajegh Nosrati for the opening concert, under the direction of fellow German conductor Goebel, who previously led the orchestra in 2019.

Other highlights include the *Nuit des Chœurs*, where leading amateur choirs from Montréal take to the stage to perform at St Andrew and St Paul's Church in an afternoon and evening celebrating the music of Bach. The event is always a crowd pleaser, and with free admission and the opportunity to sample the delicious Glühwein and German cookies and chocolates, it is an unmissable event. Just before this concert, I caught up with Scheibler and was struck by the symbolic significance of the venue, the venue of the very first festival concert in 2005. Lit in the festival's signature red, the atmosphere was magical, especially as snowflakes began to fall just before the concert. As our interview drew to a close the church had filled up, almost to capacity, a stark contrast to that inaugural concert where "the small number of people had gathered to witness serious music." The other "community project" is the popular Children's Concert, *Bach Incognito*, offering an eclectic programme alternating between Baroque and Romantic music.

During my visit, I attended the *Accademia de' Dissonanti's* concert in the beautiful Salle Bourgie. The Italian ensemble, founded in 2020 by cellist and gambist Elinor Frey, was joined by the dynamic Italian contralto Sonia Prina. This concert interwove the music of Bach and his contemporaries, Muffat and Vivaldi. One of the highlights was Prina's dramatic performance of Vivaldi's *Stabat Mater*. Prina was keen to put her own take on the performance and worked closely with Frey to achieve the desired effect.

"I asked the group not to play Vivaldi in a very light Italian way but to go for the drama," she explained. "This is

unusual because if you listen to this work performed by countertenors, you feel the lightness and purity of the voice, but from my point of view, when I have to sing this piece, I have to be telling the story of what is happening in the *Stabat Mater*."

Like me, this was Prina's first time in Montréal and after the concert she showed such delight in her experience, even spending her birthday at the festival. "It's a really lovely experience, Alexandra is amazing and it was so well organised and felt like being in a huge family," she shared. "Coming from abroad can be hard because you don't know anyone, but they really looked after me. This is not always the case, often you turn up, sing and go home."

Another highlight for Prina was the prominent role of women in the festival, a departure from similar events in her native Italy. "To be surrounded by so many powerful women was really amazing. To be understood by all of these people is an absolutely fantastic experience."

Elsewhere, festival regular Nikolas Ellis worked with Scheibler to produce a programme of cantatas and motets by not only J. S. Bach, but also J. C. Bach and J. M. Bach. Ellis's *Orchestre de l'Agora* was joined by two Austrian soloists, the tenor Daniel Johannsen and bassist Matthias Helm, capturing the festival's essence by welcoming international guests alongside great local artists. "It's a win, win situation for everybody," says Scheibler, adding that Ellis feels that his ensemble's enthusiasm "sparks over to the other artists too."

Although, to an outsider, the festival appears to be extremely well organised, with everything running seamlessly, it is not without its logistical problems, with each venue needing to be rigged up with red lights to convey the festival's signature red accent colour, a screen and sometimes even a stage.

The festival is not immune to unforeseen events, with Sir John Eliot Gardiner's well-documented misdemeanour precipitating his replacement, shortly after the final programme was printed. During my stay, a last-minute change to the programming was necessary, due to pianist Sergei Babayan contracting the flu. With her cool and calm demeanour, Scheibler took it all in her stride, and quickly enlisted Nicolas Namoradze, the Georgian pianist and composer and 2018 winner of the triennial Honens International Piano Competition in Calgary. His concert combined the works of Bach, Ligeti, Rachmaninoff, Schubert and his own compositions and was enthusiastically received. "It was a hell of a day," recalled Scheibler of the day of Babayan's news.

As we look forward to this year's festival, I can't help reflecting that in a world where everyone seems to be constantly rushing and striving for the latest innovation, there is something rather refreshing about embracing tradition and the music of Bach's Germany in such a beautiful environment.

**The 2024 edition of the Festival Bach de Montréal will take place from 16 November to 8 December. For more information, visit [festivalbachmontreal.com/en/](https://festivalbachmontreal.com/en/). With thanks to the Québec Government Office in London.**