

MEMBRA JESU NOSTRI

MONDAY 28 APRIL, 6.30PM
DUKE'S HALL



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Dieterich Buxtehude (1637-1707)

Membra Jesu nostri, BuxWV 75

Ad pedes (To the feet)

Ad genua (To the knees)

Ad manus (To the hands)

Ad latus (To the side)

Ad pectus (To the breast)

Ad cor (To the heart)

Ad faciem (To the face)

Director/Bass

Allyn Wu

Violin

Sophia Mücke

Verena Eggensberger

Cello

Santiago Lowe

Violone

Jude Chandler

Theorbo

Louis Moisan

Viol

Lucine Musaelian

Tess Roberts

Theo Nisbett

Nathaniel Giorgetti

Organ

Luke Mitchell

Harpsichord

Xiaowen Shang

Soprano

Caroline Blair

Hannah Dienes-Williams

Katherine Gregory

Ruby Skilbeck

Alto

Ruby Bak

Helena Paish

Tenor

Joseph Hancock

Louis Watkins

Bass

Harry Brookes-Owen

Dieterich Buxtehude's sacred music has long stood in the shadow of JS Bach, despite its profound influence on him. Bach's fateful 1705 journey to Lübeck – undertaken without his employers' permission – speaks to the immense respect he had for Buxtehude's artistry. Yet 19th-century scholarship often relegated Buxtehude to the role of a mere precursor, failing to acknowledge his mastery of diverse vocal and instrumental forms.

Among his 130 surviving sacred works, *Membra Jesu nostri* is unique. Composed in 1680 and dedicated to Swedish organist and composer Gustav Düben, it is Buxtehude's only extended cantata cycle in Latin. The seven cantatas form an intimate meditation on Christ's suffering, each focusing on a different part of his body on the cross. The text, drawn largely from the medieval poem *Salve mundi salutare*, is set with striking rhetorical clarity and emotional depth. Each cantata opens with an instrumental sonata, followed by a scriptural concerto and strophic arias, creating a seamless fusion of devotion and musical architecture.

Buxtehude's synthesis of North German, Italian, and rhetorical traditions reveals a composer far from provincial. His music absorbs Italian innovations – strophic arias, expressive chromaticism – while maintaining a distinctly German sense of theological contemplation. The cycle's tonal structure, moving from C minor through related flat keys before returning to its sombre opening, reinforces its devotional gravity. His dramatic sensitivity is particularly evident in moments such as the searing dissonances of *Ad manus*, the trembling string figures in *Ad genua* evoking Christ's faltering knees, and the pulsing viol consort in *Ad cor*, mirroring the slow, fading heartbeat of Christ's final moments.

You might approach this performance like a visit to an art gallery, with each cantata offering a distinct musical portrait of Christ's suffering. Just as a painter renders a subject through different angles, colours and textures, Buxtehude presents each movement as a new perspective – sometimes tender, sometimes harrowing – on the Passion. By contemplating each section individually, yet also as part of a greater whole, we engage with the work as a deeply personal and transformative experience.

Despite its introspective and mystical character, *Membra Jesu nostri* never lapses into excess. Buxtehude's seamless integration of text and music ensures that this cycle remains one of the most profound Passion meditations of the Baroque era.

Programme notes by Allyn Wu