



▲ A 64-strong choir will take to the open-air stage against the breathtaking backdrop of the Ammer valley

# A heavenly host

Performed without fail every ten years by the inhabitants of Oberammergau, the Passion Play unites music and theatre in a tradition that dates back to 1633. **Harriet Clifford** talks to music manager Markus Zwink to uncover the role of the choir and soloists in this epic theatrical undertaking. IMAGES COURTESY OF OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY 2020

There is something uncanny about the streets of Oberammergau, a Bavarian town of 5,000 inhabitants in the upper part of the Ammer valley. It could be the intricately painted archways and borders fronting the large houses, designed to look three-dimensional while lying flat against the brickwork. It could be the watchful carvings of Saint Florian adorning the doorways, still resolutely warding off any signs of fire from the once-wooden houses. It could even be the way that each house has been discreetly split down the middle, with both halves almost symmetrical, save for the height of a windowsill or the size of a door, indicating the unequal levels of wealth of the families within. But aside from these idiosyncrasies, there is something much more striking to

the observant eye, used to the encounters of a professional commuter town or city: more than half the men have long, freely growing hair on their heads and faces.

On Ash Wednesday 2019, the 'Hair and Beard Decree' was actioned in Oberammergau, applying to all the adult men (excluding those playing the Roman soldiers) selected to act in the town's world-renowned Passion Play, which runs in its ten-yearly cycle from May to October 2020.

Why the Passion Play, and why here? In 1632, a man from a neighbouring village brought the plague to the town, leading the inhabitants to make a pledge to God the following year: they vowed to perform a Passion Play portraying the life of Jesus once in every ten years if their lives were spared.

The record books state that 'not a single person perished' since the vow was made, and the town continues the tradition to this day, now in every year ending with '0', having produced the first play in 1634.

To be part of the play, whether as an actor, a musician in the orchestra, a soloist or a member of the choir, a person must have lived in Oberammergau for at least 20 years. The exceptions to the rule are schoolchildren, who are allowed to perform in the play from a young age, filling the stage to wave palm leaves as Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey. The play's director Christian Stückl, the stage and costumes director Stefan Hageneier, and the music manager Markus Zwink were all born in Oberammergau, completing a remarkable line-up of artistic talent – a talent ►





▲ The chorus brings the *tableaux vivants* to life, drawing parallels between the Old and the New Testaments



▲ In 2020, Zwink hopes to blend the music and acting scenes together; for example, as Jesus enters Jerusalem

▼ The music both 'touches the heart' and allows for reflection in between acted scenes of high emotion

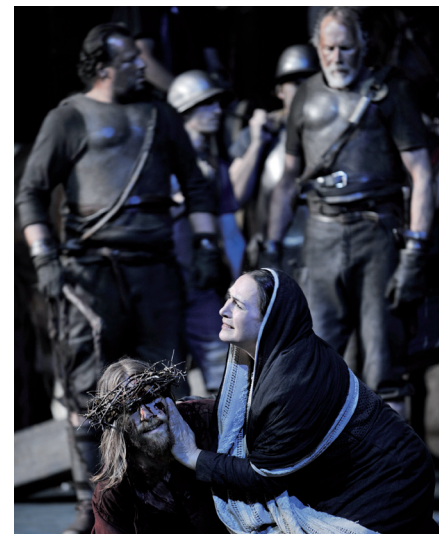


◁ which is nurtured in the children of the town from their early years. The number of residents involved in the play in all manner of capacities now reaches over 2,000, almost half of the town's population.

Zwink makes it clear that this approach to filling the 55 orchestra seats and 64 choir positions is far from a desperate scramble to meet the high standards required by the play, which is performed to 4,700 international visitors each afternoon. Rather, the town is overflowing with talent, and the performers are brought together each day from a pool of 110 musicians and singers respectively. Only a few less commonly played instruments (such as the second oboe) are sourced from elsewhere, to ensure that the quality of the music remains watertight.

The auditions for the choir were held in October 2018, requiring each candidate to take part in a week of casting, singing out of sight of the jury behind a curtain, so that, as Zwink explains, 'no one can manipulate anything'. While the singers are mainly amateurs, several of the 15 soloists are professionals, including Zwink's wife, Gabriele Weinfurter-Zwink, who is a contralto in the Bavarian Radio Choir.

Running for two of the five hours of the play, the music largely serves to explain the connections between the Old and the New Testaments, alongside the *tableaux vivants* – colourful stills displayed on the stage throughout the play, positioning the story of Jesus in relation to Old Testament events. Brought into the Passion Play in 1811, the music is based on the compositions of





Rochus Dedler (1779-1822), but is 'always in flow', with additions from Zwink and others shaping the sound over the years. It was initially composed for an orchestra of 12, plus 12-16 singers, but when the play was relocated from the original cemetery to a larger stage in 1830, the musicians were too few to be heard. In addition, the music composed by Dedler lasted eight hours, so a number of the *tableaux* have since been cut, leaving 12 opportunities for musical reflection in the form of arias, soloist ensembles and choral pieces.

Zwink explains the importance of these 'meditation points', which serve to recount the story in a different way and tap into the audience's emotions on a deeper level. Anton Burkhart, who played Jesus in 2000, Caiaphas in 2010 and who will play Joseph of Arimathea in 2020, agrees on the significance of the music, saying, 'Without the music, the Passion Play would not be what it is.' In 2020, Zwink hopes to blend the music and the acting scenes together in a way that hasn't

an immersive, surround-sound effect that fills the huge, partially open-air theatre. The choir sings a cappella on a few occasions, but most of the singing is accompanied by the orchestra.

Discussing the impact of the music on the audience, Zwink says, 'I think we should tell the story in our own way and see how it moves them. I can't direct that.' Frederik Mayet, who will return in 2020 to play Jesus for the second time, feels that 'the music sometimes touches the heart immediately', in a way that an acted scene may not. Mayet explains, 'The Passion Play is something that's very much alive. Christian [Stück] and Markus [Zwink] are always thinking, "How can we reach the audience today?"' This is a question that is answered through both the theatrical and musical decisions made on stage.

It seems remarkable that such a large-scale production can be presented to a standard warranting international attention by such a small town. Mayet acknowledges,

## 'We should tell the story in our own way and see how it moves them' – Marcus Zwink

been done before, although he admits that until rehearsals with the choir began on 18 October, he was uncertain about the form this ambition would take.

The text sung by the choir and soloists is based on words originally written for Dedler's music, but has been in flux throughout the history of the Passion Play – a 'work in progress of many people', as described by Zwink, who has written parts of it himself. He explains that the words sung by the soloists are the most significant, as they are easier to understand and help tell the story in a more explicit manner – although for those in the audience who don't speak German, there is only a written translation in the form of a hefty textbook.

Despite the 'tricky' task of conducting both the orchestra and the choir from within the deep orchestra pit, Zwink finds working with such a large group of musicians to be a 'great pleasure', and uses the expansive stage to create a sense of 'singing in many places'. He envisages spreading the choir across the space, sometimes with a smaller group of singers behind the stage, to create

'People are surprised when they come here, because the quality is high. We only have 5,000 inhabitants and we try to bring out the best.' This is done, in part, through commitment to music and theatre education in the intervening years. Zwink runs two boys' choirs, while his wife has two girls' choirs, and there are also youth choirs, adult choirs and church choirs in the town, all of which present 'possibilities to educate new singers'. Does this suggest that 'anyone can do it' if given the resources? Zwink replies that 'they have to have aims', which appears to correspond with the drive clearly visible within those involved in the play.

During the intervening nine years, the Passion Play theatre is used to host operas, Shakespeare plays and other Biblical productions, although the size of the audience is significantly reduced. These performances enable the community to come together artistically, sharpen talent and ensure that the town is ready to welcome the world to their theatre each decade.

There is clearly a strong religious motivation in the roots of the Oberammergau



▲ Music manager Markus Zwink finds 'great pleasure' in working with a large chorus

Passion Play, based as it is on a vow made to God in the setting of a traditionally Catholic town in southern Germany. Yet Mayet doesn't feel that people who live there are necessarily more religious – rather, that they are more open to discussion about religion. While some visitors from around the world treat it as a pilgrimage, he explains, 'If you're an open-minded person, even if you have a different religion, you can take something with you.' Zwink does not think it is important that audience members leave being 'more religious', but instead that they feel moved and part of the special history of the play in Bavarian culture.

Alongside wooden carvings, painted houses and unruly facial hair, the music in the Passion Play is part of this culture in Oberammergau, a town where people remain generation after generation to secure their role in the story of Jesus's life. It is, however, somewhat telling that 200 men applied to play one of the 60 (beardless) Roman soldiers in 2020. As Burkhart puts it, not everyone can afford to 'look that wild'. ■

*There will be 103 performances of the Passion Play between 16 May and 4 October 2020. Harriet Clifford was a guest of the German National Tourist Office and Passionsspiele Oberammergau. For further information, please see [germany.travel](http://germany.travel), [visitberlin.de/en](http://visitberlin.de/en) or [passionsspiele-oberammergau.de](http://passionsspiele-oberammergau.de)*