

# “... an almost unfathomable gift”: An Interview with Nikolaus Matthes Concerning His New Markuspassion

## By James A. Altena

Nikolaus Matthes has daringly undertaken a self-assigned task that might seem to be a supreme act of hubris: He has taken the surviving libretto of *Picander* (Christian Friedrich Henrici, 1700–1764) for the *Markus-Passion* of J. S. Bach, the music for which is lost, and has made for it not a new reconstruction of the score using parodies of other works by Bach, but instead a completely new score of his own creation. Furthermore, in so doing he has written the entire work not in a modern musical idiom, but one entirely of Bach’s own time and even to some extent his voice. The results, premiered and recorded live in Switzerland in March 2023, are a brilliant and profoundly moving success. Here, Matthes shares with *Fanfare* readers some of the story behind the composition, performance, and recording of this remarkable score.



Markuspassion  
NOW AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE,  
STREAM, & DOWNLOAD  
RESONANDO  
AMAZON MUSIC  
APPLE MUSIC  
SPOTIFY  
YouTube Music

*Before we turn to your Markuspassion, I’d like to give our readers some background about you as its creator. Was your family a musical one? Did you display any exceptional musical aptitude while growing up? What led you originally to turn to work in theater and film-making instead of in music (from 2000 to 2016), and what prompted your return to musical studies beginning in 2013?*

First of all, thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts and stories—it is a great pleasure for me. While I did not grow up in a musical family, my parents, who are academics, are highly interested in music. My initial “education,” so to speak, was first my mum singing for me every night before going to bed; then, singing canons with my neighbor and her children when we were in the car on the way to school every morning; and finally, attending the annual *Christmas Oratorio* concert in one of the amazing Gothic churches of Lüneburg in northern Germany, where I grew up. It was an event that was always very important to me; I felt like I was “bathed” in Bach once in every year. One of my father’s sisters said she noticed some exceptional musical aptitude in me, but I always refused to acknowledge it. (And I still do! I feel much more like a craftsman than an artist.) Maybe this is why I did not start with professional musical training straight after graduating from school; I wanted to try things that were more apparent at that time, and also I have always been very insecure about what to do professionally. A teenage friend of mine asked me back in 2001 if I would direct a theater piece with his school class; I accepted, and that led me to direct around 20 theater productions with teenagers within 15 years. This was a “golden age” for me. Turning back to music, really, was an urge I had in 2013 because I thought, “It’s now or never—otherwise I will be too old even to start.”

*Between 2013 and 2018 you studied composition with Michel Roth, and music theory with Johannes Menke, both in Basel. What would you say were the most important things you learned from each of them that have shaped you as the composer you are today?*

Having Michel as my main teacher, with his infinite knowledge of music, art, literature and life, was probably the biggest stroke of luck that could happen to me; and Johannes, equally important but from a completely different angle, added to this a tremendously broad perspective on so-called “early music,” supporting the more historical side of my studies. Since I hardly ever compose in a musical language other than Baroque, I would not say that a style of either of these teachers has formed my own work. But what I learned from the *combination* of the two, was to find the—hopefully perfect—balance between form and freedom: between complying with musical conventions or deciding to leave them behind.

*What would you like to tell us about your career in theater and film, and how do you see those as having influenced your conceptions and work as a composer?*

As for film, what I really learned was that film is *not* my profession. This doesn't mean that I didn't have amazing teachers—for example, cinematographer John Ward, one of the most important mentors I have ever had. I never started a film career, though. But the knowledge about filmmaking really helped me in all my own theater and music productions. If you know what filmmaking people have to go through (especially regarding technical skills), you are able to integrate those skills better into your own work.

In theater, it was different: The hundreds and hundreds of teenagers I have worked with in all the productions we made were in reality my most important teachers. As I said before, the 15 years of teaching theater were a “golden age” for me, and these years really shaped me as a human being. This is the most striking and beautiful influence you can have, and also as a composer. Let me quote Herbert von Karajan: “The thankfulness of young people whom you have helped out of a problem is one of the most beautiful things on earth.” I felt the thankfulness of so many young people for so many years—not necessarily because I helped them out of a problem, but because teaching them was a real *Lebensschule* (school of life), and therefore important for music and composition as well.

*As you note in your essay in the book accompanying this recording, Bach's Markus-Passion has undergone several and very different musicological reconstructions. What sparked your own interest in the Markus-Passion, and what motivated you to put your own hand to creating a completely original setting of it? More specifically, was your motivation strictly musical and dramaturgical, or were you also motivated by personal religious or spiritual beliefs?*

First of all, neither religious nor spiritual beliefs played a part in the process of composing. I can neither recall the moment nor the reason why I started thinking about setting Picander's St. Mark Passion libretto to music; I just remember doing a few first sketches back in April 2019. None of the musicological reconstructions were of any importance for this; maybe the wish to create something of my own arose from my skepticism. I studied the sources, not the reconstructions, and found out that there is *no proof* whatsoever that Bach set Picander's text to music at all. This teased and intrigued me: Why not try it yourself? It was a bit like a “sporting” exercise for me. I also posed the question to myself: “Are you able to do such a thing?” And then, the day before

Christmas 2019, I really started composing. Three months later, in April 2020, the composition was complete, and I refined it in the following two years. So—yes, my motivation was, if you want, strictly musical.

*In composing your Markuspasion, you chose to employ a thoroughgoing 18th-century Baroque compositional voice. Why did you not write in a modern compositional style, such as Penderecki did for his St. Luke Passion and Osvaldo Golijov has done more recently for his St. Mark Passion? Do you think that the stylistic eclecticism of present-day Postmodernism facilitated your choice? How would you respond to any critics who would reject what you have done as “unoriginal” and “reactionary”?*

Maybe one of the most important reasons why I chose an 18th-century Baroque musical voice was Picander’s text: It is written in Baroque German, so in order to set it to music I would need to employ the same musical language, wouldn’t I? Moreover, my wish is to create the experience of a first performance (*Uraufführung*) as if it were in the Baroque times. It is no longer possible for us to hear Baroque pieces we already know as if for the first time; but if one writes a *new* piece in that language, this experience becomes quite possible. You *think* that you know the piece because of its musical language, but actually you have never heard it. This doesn’t rule out that I might, in the future, write another Passion in another musical language; but since I feel very comfortable in “speaking” Baroque, for this time I chose this way.

And of course, yes, the stylistic eclecticism of our day really made the choice easy. It’s so rare that I hear a contemporary piece which really touches or moves me, and so there is another wish: I really hope to touch the listeners and performers with my music. And I hope it works. *If* it works—*this* would be one of my first responses to a critic. And maybe the “reactionary” part of my piece is the fact that it is *not* “modern”—something very easy to criticize for contemporary composers who refuse to refer to a certain musical language. But try to do it yourself! It’s not easier or less complex or less “contemporary” just because it’s referring to a language that stands within early music!

*To my ears, the chorales in your Markuspasion adhere quite strictly to a Bachian style, but the recitatives and arias leaven that with influences from the Italian Baroque. Am I off base in thinking this, or is there anything to it?*

What an interesting observation! Let me put it this way: Yes, the chorales are firmly rooted in Bachian soil. For the arias and recitatives, I really have to admit that I didn’t study the Italian Baroque extensively enough to answer your point with a Yes or a No. But this is for sure: I do every now and then abandon my “native soil,” be it in the arias or the recitatives (*and* also in the chorales sometimes). This may be what you hear: Some deviations, roundabouts, exaggerations, enrichments, all of which are attributes to an Italian way of life. And so, I definitely hope there is some *italianità* in the piece! If you hear it, it’s even better—no matter if it is musicologically provable, or even better if it’s not!

*Are there any parts of your Markuspassion that deviate from adherence to 18th-century forms of melody, harmony, rhythm, etc., and resort to more modern techniques? If so, could you cite some of those specifically, and explain what motivated you to deviate at those particular junctures?*

Yes, indeed, there are some deviations. But the truth for me is that I really cannot explain them. It is as if you were cooking, following a very precise recipe, and just added a bit more spice here or some salt and pepper there, since you know that without doing so the food would taste a bit too undistinctive, even boring or stale. And *these* are the deviations, in general—where things get *really* tasty, so to speak. Take, for example, the aria “Falsche Welt, dein schmeichelnd Küssen” (No. 21, on CD 1). It is about falseness, lies, sins. And I tried to transgress in a musical way, so to speak—doing so, that is, by starting off on a sixth chord *and* on the offbeat, weaving in chromatic lines, canons, “battles” between the oboes and the strings—and therefore depicting the “false world.” Another example—and maybe it is this piece where we are the farthest away from Bach and the musical Baroque—is the “Sinfonia” (No. 47d, on CD 3). This piece was originally a Lied, composed for baritone and piano, and I transposed and transcribed it for bassoon and orchestra, as funeral music just after Pilate has given the corpse of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathea for burial. The Sinfonia was not originally intended to be part of the Passion, but I chose to include it as a result of a personal experience I had in late spring 2021. It really is a “foreign object” here, as that experience forsook the Baroque cosmos almost completely, but it is quite suitable, and also because it sounds nice when played on Baroque instruments.

*In what ways if any do you see your background in theater and film as informing your interpretive outlook as a conductor?*

There is no influence from my background in film at all, because I hardly know any films and never really watch any. But regarding theater, let me return to what I said about my time as a teacher: My *students* really triggered and formed me as a human being, and also my behavior towards other people, and therefore also towards musicians. The wish to *show* something to other people, to show them what I love, and to set an example for them in how and why and for whom I am doing something, is absolutely crucial for me. This has to be combined with *love*, meaning love *for what* you do and love *towards whom* you work with. I want to embrace them. Let me quote two other great musicians here. Alice Harnoncourt got to the heart of the matter: “You cannot make music with someone you don’t like. It’s just impossible.” And Bernard Haitink: “You have to embrace the orchestra, musically and mentally. Don’t ask how you achieve it; you just do it.” These two statements give the best summary of what I consider to be the direct influences and consequences of my time as a theater director and teacher.

*In seeking to assemble the forces and resources needed for the premiere of your work, did you meet any resistance from people who, e.g., dismissed your work unheard as being simply an uninteresting or inferior imitation of Bach and Baroque music? Did you succeed in overcoming any initial skeptics?*

Surprisingly, I cannot remember one single moment of skepticism or resistance. I hand-picked every single musician for the first performances to assemble a group that would meet my wish to be *harmonic* in musical terms, but moreover to be harmonious with regard to *human relations*; and this gave me the possibility to choose people who resonate and harmonize well with each other. Not one of them dismissed anything, and there was not one single voice which said anything like “Uninteresting” or “Inferior compared with Bach” or other “real” Baroque composers. In fact, we never compared here: I did not write the *Markuspassion* to be compared with Bach or to even compete with him. I hope it will have its own life, so to speak.

There was one person, in the audience in Basel, who wrote a letter to me after the concert, trying to prove that I had taken this or that piece from this or that cantata of Bach, and so on. Of course, I presume that the *Markuspassion*—and therefore I as a musician—may intimidate people, especially musicologists, or perhaps even more, composers who also write music in the Baroque language or who have themselves set part of Picander’s libretto. But there has never been any bad intention from my side. I don’t want to scare people; I want them to enjoy it.

*How did you go about assembling the diverse array of singers and instrumentalists for your performances, and how long did it take to put them together? Also, how did you find the necessary financial support to realize this project, including production of the recording?*

As mentioned above, I started composing the composition just before Christmas 2019. When I began, I immediately started to ask the crucial instrumentalists (i.e., first traverso, first oboe, bassoon, violoncello, etc.) and all the solo singers if they would be interested in taking part. They *all* accepted within a very short time (just a couple of weeks), and this led to the amazing situation that I was actually able to compose the entire piece for the musicians who first performed it. The part of the two evangelists is explicitly written for Daniel Johannsen and Georg Poplutz; the traverso solos are written for Johanna Bartz and Luis Martínez Pueyo; the oboe solos for Andreas Helm, the baritone part for his brother Matthias, the alto part for Annekathrin Laabs, the bassoon part for Susann Landert, and so on, just to give you a few examples. What a luxury—and what luck! The same was true for the financial support for the whole production: We were very lucky to find generous and broad support. You can find the names of our supporters in the “Acknowledgements” section of the CD.

*In your own essay for the book in this set, you speak of how the “mutual experiences” of you and the performing musicians “grew into an almost unfathomable gift” during the rehearsals. What were some of the specific reactions of the musicians to the composition itself, and to this occasion? Were there any noteworthy unexpected difficulties that needed to be overcome?*

I have already described many of these. All the musicians were enormously curious and keen to find out what this music would sound like—including myself, who had heard the music only in my mind and, when editing the score and the instrumental parts, from the computer. We were surprised, sometimes even terrified, of how it sounded—but in a good way; everything worked smoothly. The fact that we had a hand-picked vocal and instrumental ensemble was a sort of

guarantee for harmony and resonance in musical and human terms. We *really* were all friends—which is not an obvious thing if you work with more than 65 musicians over a period of 14 days, very close together, each and every one with their own personal needs—but we made it, and there was not a single moment of difficulty or distress in the whole production. And, as I wrote in the CD book, I was able “to watch them all enjoying”—a wish that Carlos Kleiber once expressed to an orchestra he was conducting. A musician who was part of the project just recently told me that when she met other participants in more recent productions, they felt like they had been part of a kind of “conspiracy.”

*In his essay for the book accompanying this recording, Pius Strassmann comments on the freedom you gave to the assembled musicians in realizing your score. Doubtless every composer has a rather specific mental image of what he expects and wants his compositions to sound like, and doubtless they sometimes are taken aback by what they unexpectedly hear performers produce instead. What do you see as being the tensions or paradoxes of moving from the role of composer to conductor in your own work, and how did you resolve those to the satisfaction of both yourself and of the performers?*

If you compose something and are lucky enough to lead the ensemble which plays your music yourself, you have to say “goodbye” to the composer in yourself and lead the musicians, without leaning back and just listening to them. Of course you listen to what they play, and you adjust, correct, and rehearse—but you should listen as a *conductor*, not as a composer any more, because the compositional process should be concluded way before you start rehearsing. Furthermore, there has to be thorough preparation, which is nothing but very hard work. Thorough preparation gives you complete freedom in the rehearsals and performances, enabling you to give complete freedom to the musicians and not necessarily expecting to hear some *idée fixe* of what you have composed. I have let them play and listened to the music as if I never heard it before—and I was so thankful for their playing, let alone for the *sound* they produced. I had never heard anything like this before. And I recall Herbert von Karajan again, who compared conducting to the moment of takeoff: “If you come to the moment when 120 people [an orchestra] become one single body—and this moment comes, infallibly—it is the same sensation as when, all of a sudden, you take off from the runway and don’t have the sensation of gravity, of heaviness, any more. It is actually very similar to this sensation; you are, in fact, leading and directing the whole thing only as a spiritual matter.” This is exactly how it felt. It is complete freedom—but it needs meticulous preparation and hard work *long before* you rehearse and perform. Otherwise, a takeoff is impossible—let alone a spiritual experience in the way Karajan has put it.

*Strassmann’s essay also states that “unfortunately [the premiere performances] received little attention—not only in Lucerne, but in Zurich and Berne as well, and it was not even the case in every performance that there were as many people in the audience as onstage.” If true, that would be beyond unfortunate—a tragedy even, in my estimation. But your website, markuspassion.com, has numerous favorable press notices about the performances, which would*

*suggest that they were reasonably well publicized and attended. Is Herr Strassmann's statement somewhat hyperbolic, then, and if not was the audience disproportionately constituted by members of the musical press?*

Strassmann's statement reflects the poor Swiss press scenario regarding notices on cultural events in general—and, unfortunately, he tells the truth. All the statements on our website are reactions to the CD release and the CD itself, and date from February to April 2024; and not one of them, apart from Strassmann's essay itself, is a reaction to the first performances in 2023. Yes, that was hard for all of us, but we were lucky enough with the people who came to hear us: They were astonished and so happy with the concerts.

*Are there any immediate plans for further performances? If so, when, and where, and with whom?*

So far, I just have ideas, but no plans, ideas not ready to be shared yet—but they will come. For now, I would love to perform the *Markuspassion* with the same ensemble again, hopefully at festivals, wherever in the world—the Bachfest in Leipzig, of course, would be an amazing place to play it—but we are looking forward to whatever comes up. And, so far, four other organizers have already asked if they could perform the *Markuspassion* with their own ensembles—something I am really happy about.

*The production values of this recording are most impressive—an elegant 176-page illustrated book with annotated libretto and essays, a separate case for the CDs, and a hardshell outer slipcase for both. Who conceived all this and saw it through to completion?*

My dear friends Marco Trüeb, an amazing graphic designer; Bettina Brotbek, an ingenious photographer; and Johannes Wallbrecher, our unbeatable and impeccable executive producer, were responsible for the design, illustrations, and the actual making of the product itself. Together with Marco, I conceived the booklet and all its components, and put together the texts; then, two of my closest friends, Paul Suits and Roberto Bargellini, came in for the English and Italian translations. I insisted on and achieved—as in every part and step of the project—that humans and *not* Artificial Intelligence should do this step. And look at the result: What a pleasure, reading the English and Italian texts! It is an honor and a tremendous joy for me to have Paul and Roberto be a part of this. Marco and I then chose from the photographs that Bettina had taken during rehearsals and performance in Basel in March 2023, and Johannes in the end managed to bring all the prepared material together and have it produced in its current form. I was very keen to achieve a result which meets all requirements of a hand-crafted book, and therefore to design a product that will last and bring joy to many listeners and performers.

*What other compositions have you written, or are you planning to write? How would you describe your usual modernistic compositional style, as opposed to the Baroque style you adopted for this project?*

At the moment, I have no specific plans yet—just, as I said above, some ideas (which I will share whenever they are ready). Furthermore, I don't think I have a "standard modernistic compositional style"; I always compose in a way that I think suits the requirements of the text. For example, I composed a farewell cantata for a professor who retired in 2018; he was our ear training teacher at the Music Academy in Basel and had taught for 42 years. His ear training method was based on Bach's music, so I wrote in Bach's style. A year later, I composed a commemorative piece for a dear friend of mine who had died the year before. It was a piece for 14 voices, not Baroque at all, but written *in memoriam* of this friend, with musical and stylistic references to his life and his personality. But if I would have to choose a preferred "style" to write in, though, I would always come back to the Baroque, particularly the language of Bach—it's the one I am most familiar with, despite the voices who say it's not "contemporary." I don't agree with them at all, but to discuss this, we would need much more time and space—and patience, perhaps—and definitely a good sense of humor!

*What are your personal plans for music, theater, and/or film for the immediate future?*

Again, for now, I am "limited" to *ideas*. I completely stopped filmmaking some years ago, and theater directing, I think, is likewise something I may not return to. Musically, first I will try to re-perform *Markuspassion* with—hopefully!—broader public attention, and see what happens. And I wish that many others will want to play the piece and enjoy listening to it.