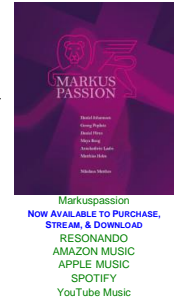


NIKOLAUS MATTHES *Markuspassion* • Nikolaus Matthes, cond;
Maya Boog (sop); Annekathrin Laabs (alt); Daniel Johannsen, Georg
Poplutz (*Evangelist*, ten); Daniel Pérez (*Christ*); Matthias Helm (*Petrus*,
bar); Damiano Capelli (*Pilatus*); Luís Neiva (*Judas*); Gli Aspetti Ch &
O • RESONANDO 10018 (3 CDs: 161:17 &) Live: St Peter's Church, Zurich
and St. Matthew's Church, Lucerne 3/22–26/2023

There is quite a lot to get one's head around here. This is a Baroque-style piece by a composer born in 1981; it sets the Passion text by Picander. It arrives in one of the most lavish packagings I have seen, a box housing a set of three compact discs plus a hardback book instead of the usual small booklet. The engineering standards match the visual appeal of the product itself. The music is a joy to listen to as a purely auditory experience, with a perfect sound picture and impeccable reproduction of instrumental timbres.



We know that on Good Friday, March 23, 1731, there was a performance in Leipzig of a “text to the passion music after Mark the Evangelist”; what is unknown (amongst many things) is whether that was a pastiche or an original piece by Johann Sebastian Bach. We do know for sure that Picander (Christian Friedrich Henrici) provided the text, and that no music survives. Enter Nikolaus Matthes, who has taken on the Picander text into his own Baroque setting. The first performance of his version took place in Zurich, exactly 292 years after the original, mystery-enshrouded event, followed by performances in Berne, Basel, and Lucerne. What is heard here is taken from both the final rehearsal and the first concert in Zurich, and the final concert in Lucerne. Berlin-born Matthes studied film in London, before concentrating on composition with Michel Roth and music theory with Johannes Menke at Basel from 2013 to 2018. He has immersed himself in the music of Bach and his contemporaries for decades, which stands him in good stead for this gargantuan task.

But does it work? Absolutely. This is the most remarkable Baroque music of our time. By which I mean this does not feel like the 21st century looking back; instead, it feels as if it were written back in Bach's time, with the exception of the odd detour forwards. Most of the time, it could be music written by Bach himself, and I can offer no higher praise to Matthes's achievement.

There are two parts—“Before the Sermon” and “After the Sermon”—each with eight chorales as part of their fabric. The first is more contemplative; the second is more dramatic, with the chorus representing the populace. The characteristic dotted rhythms of the orchestral opening, its darkness, all sound familiar, and yet somehow new. The calibration of parts is clearly carefully considered to provide a characteristic sound, with the basses digging into their dactylic rhythms in the opening chorus, “Geh, Jesu, geh zu deiner Pein!” (Go, Jesus, go to your pain!). The choir has the requisite heaviness (both the choir and orchestra were ad hoc ensembles, and their members are fully listed in the documentation); it also has the lightness required for the brief but

impactful “Was soll doch dieser Unrath?” (Why was this waste of ointment made?). Chorales deliver the perfect effect, commenting, offering solace, and speaking as the voice of the assembled apostles.

Picander’s dramatic pace is perfect; Matthes’ realization likewise follows its contours perfectly, and with infinite imagination. His setting of the chorale “Ich, ich und meine Sünden” (I, I and all my sins) feels quite daring, with the separation of the repeated “Ich,” but one should also remember the dramatic strokes of both *echt* Bach Passions (Matthew and John) and how bold they can sound. Another piece from Part I is the astonishing 14-minute aria for tenor and traverso obbligato, “Mein Heyland, dich vergeß ich nicht” (My Savior, I shall not forget you)—please note that I retain the archaic German spellings given in the accompanying book—this is, for this listener, the most markable achievement of the entire work. The texture is pared down to the two soloists, with lower instruments offering quiet, punctuating chords, articulating both rhythm and cadence, over which the flute wends its florid line and the tenor sings his melody.

Matthes’s grasp of *Affektenlehre*, too, is complete, and used to powerful effect at the “sighing” end of the recitative preceding the chorale “Betrübtes Hertz, sey Wohlgemuth” (O grieving heart, have faith), at the lines “Meine Seele ist betrübt biß an den Tod, enthaltet euch hie, und wachet” (My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch). The continuo group comprises harpsichord (Sebastian Wienand), organ (Johannes Keller), and lute or baroque guitar (Julian Behr), and is deployed with huge imagination by Matthes, not least in the final part recitative for the Evangelist, “Und die mit ihm gecreutziget waren” (And they that were crucified with Him), where the continuo group’s color is a vital part of the effect.

The baritone soloist is Matthias Helm, who delivers his Part I “Ich lasse dich, mein Jesu, nicht” (I leave you not, my Jesus) with real gusto. The drama is ratcheted up here by Matthes in some arguably non-Bachian interruptive accents. A special mention is due for sure of the violin obbligato here from concertmaster Germán Echeverri Chamorro, whose playing is that of a true virtuoso. Matthes offers some fascinating harmonic twists before the reprise of the aria’s A1 section. As the *St. Mark* text includes the famous line, “Creutzige ihn” (Crucify him), one awaits Matthes’s setting with some impatience. It is worth waiting for: It sounds frenzied, the sonic equivalent of a crowd in complete, directionless turmoil and yet all of one fundamental mind.

The Evangelists, Daniel Johannsen and Georg Poplutz, are superb, shading the text exquisitely according to its meaning. One of the most remarkable moments is at the end of Part I, the recitative “Und die Jünger verließen ihn alle, und flohen” (And they all forsook him, and fled), describing the forsaking of Jesus as those around him flee. This is music of disjunctive pain, while the final chorale of Part I is given the sonic equivalent of lead feet in “Ich will hier bey dir stehen” (I will remain here with you).

Daniel Pérez is a good Jesus, but I would welcome a little more firmness in his lower register and more tone on top; the important line “Das ist mein Blut des Neuen Testaments” (This is my blood of the new testament) could be a touch more confident, more authoritative. Similarly, the

crucial sentiment of “Der Geist ist willig, aber das Fleisch ist schwach” (The spirit is ready, but the flesh is weak) passes with minimum incident. Soprano Maya Boog is good if not perfect in her aria “Er kommt, er kommt, er ist vorhanden!” (He nears, he nears, he is here!), just missing the requisite freedom of voice. She is given one of the crucial moments, the aria “Angenehmes Mord-Geschrey!” (O welcome cries of murder!). Against a positively chthonic bass, here she comes into her own; complemented by Chamorro’s expressive violin and Andreas Helm’s equally piercing oboe, the burden seems great indeed. What a way to end the second disc.

Ironically perhaps, given the story, it is perhaps Luís Neiva who has the most beautiful voice (he plays Judas, so the Devil gets not only the best tunes but also the best voices as well, it appears). The voice and musicality of alto Annekathrin Laabs is most appealing. Her voice has real gravitas, and she needs it for the forceful “Falsche Welt” (False world) towards the end of Part I. She is called to be active, in dialogue with the orchestra in spiky, ascending gestures, and the result is electric. It is Laabs who opens Part II (which begins with the second disc and is spread out over two discs, as it just lasts more than the duration of one CD) with “Mein Tröster ist nicht mehr bey mir” (My consoler has left me), a moment of terrific *Innigkeit*, reflected in Matthes’s gossamer string scoring.

It is fascinating to hear the contrapuntal ecstasies of the chorus on the brief phrase “Weissage uns” (Prophecy), not least in the context of the violence of the next line (the Evangelist’s relating of the servants striking Jesus with their hands). To have a choir capable of delivering the consoling chorale “Du edles Angesichte” (You noble countenance) is luxury indeed, and the emotional point is powerfully made.

The third CD includes the spitting on Jesus, his degradation, and the mocking of the mob, at which point the chorus completely comes into its own on this recording. There are moments in this final panel where Matthes most obviously veers from the Bachian highway; the return to the invented Baroque feels like coming home. Orchestrally, there is a *sinfonia* prior to the chorale “O! Jesu du” (O! My Jesus) that offers a moment of stillness that is as eerie as it is full of foreboding; it is a remarkable moment of music that is rooted in Bach, and yet feels free to extend its tendrils to the deepest recesses of the psyche. Small wonder the chorus about Christ’s tombstone initially seems doom-laden (despite the words promising joy). This is the final chorus, and as the movement progresses it becomes clear this is a *siciliana*; a ray of light penetrates the musical surface ever so slowly.

It should go without saying that Matthes paces the work brilliantly, but one takeaway is the thought of what he would be like conducting the St. Matthew and St. John Bach originals? His pause after the Part II chorale “Herr, ich habe mißgehandelt” (Lord I have been remiss) before the Evangelist announces the meeting between the priests, elders, and scribes is electric, and he ensures that there is a shroud of darkness over this second part, enshrined in the low instrument scoring. The smaller individuals of the story are all well taken: Damiano Capelli in particular is a firm Pilatus.

This musicological adventure is not unique: Just a week or so ago, I heard a reconstruction of a Bach keyboard concerto, BWV 1059R, from just the surviving opening few measures by Mahan Esfahani at London's Wigmore Hall. But it is unique in its ambition and, for this listener at least, surprisingly powerful in its realization. Recommended. **Colin Clarke**