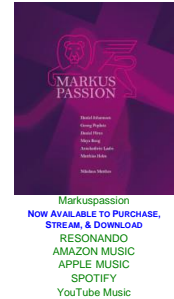


**NIKOLAUS MATTHES** *Markuspassion* • Nikolaus Matthes, cond;  
Maya Boog (sop); Annekathrin Laabs (alt); Daniel Johannsen, Georg  
Poplutz (*Evangelist*, ten); Daniel Pérez (*Christ*); Matthias Helm (*Petrus*,  
bar); Damiano Capelli (*Pilatus*); Luís Neiva (*Judas*); Gli Aspetti Ch &  
O • RESONANDO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

On Good Friday, March 23, 1731, a “text of the passion music after Mark the Evangelist” was performed at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig. The music has completely disappeared. It was believed for some time that this music was by J. S. Bach, but according to various notes there is no absolute proof that the music was by Bach. Nikolaus Matthes, in his mid-40s now, a sound-engineer and musician steeped in aspects of Bach, has, as the notes say, “bypassed all previous scholarly reconstruction attempts and has unceremoniously and newly composed the music that has not survived.” These previous reconstructions have generally followed information discovered by musicologist Alfred Dürr, who in 1974 published a detailed study of possible (parody) sources for this particular passion. There have been many attempts at reconstruction, and many recordings are listed on this website <https://bach-cantatas.com/Vocal/BWV247.htm>. Discs by Andreas Fischer and Ton Koopman have been reviewed in these pages, as well as a few others.



Here, however, we have this brand-new composition, which was first performed in four Swiss cities towards the end of March 2023. It is in the style perhaps of J. S. Bach, but does not use the music of Bach or his contemporaries, except in a few explicit quotations. Both parts of this Passion—“Before the sermon” and “After the sermon”—contain eight chorales. This is more than in St. John (11) and St. Matthew (13), giving them a much greater emphasis. As for the soloists, they sing two arias apiece, one in each part, with the tenor arias coming first and last in another demonstration of the symmetry involved in this passion. Slightly confusingly, there are two Evangelists in this recording who declaim their recitatives quite dramatically.

The text consists of chapters 14 and 15 of the Gospel of Mark. The first part is the more thoughtful part, if you like, based on the words of Christ, from his anointing in Bethany until his seizure and arrest. The second part is dominated by people who communicate or intervene in the events as they occur, notably the crucifixion and death of Jesus. The text used is by Christian Friedrich Henrici, who was also known as Picander. Only two printed copies of the Picander texts originally are known, from 1731 and 1744; the later one, found in St. Petersburg some 15 years ago, contains two additional arias. Most of the reconstructions also use this text. This work is still, however, a contemporary piece in a Baroque style, using early 18th-century rules. The instrumentation consists mainly of strings, harpsichord, organ, lute, two double-basses, two recorders, and four oboes, plus a bassoon for the last tenor aria, of which more anon.

The soloists are mostly a fine group. The Evangelist is sung by two tenors, Georg Poplutz and Daniel Johannsen. Poplutz is a singer steeped in Baroque music. He has sung Bach and Schütz, plus cantatas as well as Lieder, and made his operatic debut in Monteverdi some 20 years ago. Johannsen, born in Austria, became a church musician, and studied at the Vienna Music

University, from which he graduated in 2005. He attended masterclasses with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Nicolai Gedda, and Christa Ludwig, and made his debut in the *Christmas Oratorio* in late 1998. Jesus is sung by Daniel Pérez, a Swiss baritone, who also studied conducting; he made his debut some 11 years ago. His whitish baritone is extremely pleasant and steady. Peter has a characterful voice in the shape of Matthias Helm. He specializes in the passions and oratorios of Bach, Handel, and Mendelssohn as well as singing in operas by Britten, Hindemith, Purcell, and Mozart. His aria, No. 13 in the score, “Ich lasse dich,” is superb and brings the whole work to life. The Chorale at No. 17 does, on the other hand, tend to drag a touch. Soprano Maya Boog first appears in her aria at No. 19. She has been singing for over 20 years and was part of the company at the Theater Basel, singing lyric soprano roles from Handel to Puccini. She recently retired from the stage. Her aria is not sung to any great effect and she is not entirely steady. It also is not easy to make out what words she is singing. In stark contrast Annekathrin Laabs springs out of the grooves with her fruity and steady alto. Born in 1974 in Dresden, she is apparently well known on the concert circuit as a Bach specialist; on stage she has sung in roles from Monteverdi to Verdi. Part I ends with the chorale “Ich will hier bey dir stehen.” Laabs rolls in to start Part II with her aria “Mein Tröster ist nicht mehr bey mir.” Helms dispatches the lovely flowing aria “Will ich doch gar gerne schweigen,” No. 36 in Part II, with remarkable smoothness. The crucifixion and aftermath are sung with precision and drama by the choir and especially the Evangelists. No. 46, the aria for tenor, sounds almost out of place—that is, rather from a more modern time, especially in the slower bridge passage. I am very keen on the poor Centurion, who at No. 47b seems to have very little to do but proclaim—grandly and effectively, I should add—“Wahrlich, dieser Mensch ist Gottes Sohn gewesen.”

How the future will see this work is of course difficult to tell, but without a doubt Matthes has accomplished something marvelous. It has more than a hint of Bach, but is it Bach? The jury must be out on that, but then is that not the idea? The production is excellent. The book, the notes, the texts, and other details all deserve much praise. The performance itself is also highly effective and—excepting perhaps the soprano—the soloists are splendid, with Helm and Laabs being outstanding. The recitatives are especially well handled by the two tenors, whose diction is clear, concise, and dramatic. The sound is detailed, but the orchestral contribution is not always detailed enough. This must really be an automatic recommendation for all collectors of Bach and Baroque oratorios. **David Cutler**