

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



Markuspassion
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We know that Johann Sebastian Bach set the Passion narratives for all four of the Gospels, some perhaps more than once, but to date only the Passions according to Matthew and John appear to have survived intact. Though many of these works have had their status raised to an icon in the choral repertory, particularly at Easter, the search for the missing two Passions has been continuous. To be sure, there is a *St. Luke Passion* (BWV 246), but it has been deemed spurious, with the possibility of Bach's intervention only minimal. We do, however, know that he collaborated with Christian Friedrich Henrici, known by his pen name of Picander, on a number of religious works, including the *St. Matthew Passion*. Picander's text for the lost *St. Mark Passion* has survived, and instead of trying to decipher which pieces in other works once may have belonged to it, conductor Nikolaus Matthes has decided to compose his own setting, but using the style of the period and with period instruments that would likely have been used if Bach's original had survived; here, read those used in his other extant Passions.

We are familiar with other composers who have studied the style of famous musicians and used their expertise to write pieces in the style. Federico Sardelli and his modern Vivaldi works come to mind. This Passion, however, reaches an entirely higher level. Matthes has chosen not to imitate Bach (and who really can?), but rather to write a work that intends justifiably to stand alongside the iconic surviving Passions. It had a long and rather difficult genesis, but the results are quite fascinating—not just channeling Bach, but creating music on one of his texts that will fit together as a unit. Let the audience be aware, however, that Matthes does not by any means attempt to “reconstruct” the Leipzig master, but rather is clear that this is his own project, his own work.

The packet is richly designed, with a large booklet featuring the entire Picander text and Matthes's description of his own compositional method in creating a work that would fit in the style and period. The three discs themselves show the expansive work at its finest. The opening chorus has the occasional harmonic inflection that sounds a bit like Emanuel Bach, and yet the restless dotted rhythms present a powerful and decisive opening statement. One would be hard pressed to see this outside the realm of the Baroque German Passion. The interaction between the Evangelist (here sung by both Daniel Johannsen and Georg Poplutz) and the brief chorus inserts moves smoothly and easily, as a narration should. Matthes's chorale harmonizations are not only written in a conventional manner, but there are moments of good inner voices. The long first aria, “Mein Heyland, dich vergeß ich nicht,” is soft and hesitant, a heartfelt prayer with a meandering and sometimes contrary transverse flute being the foil for the languid tenor. The result, though texturally a bit threadbare, is serene and effective. The next aria, “Ich lasse dich, mein Jesu, nicht” is more march-like, with an insistent pair of oboes outlining the baritone solo. I

felt a bit closer to Handel than Bach here, but it does fit the ambience of the narrative. The chorale “Machs mit mir Gott, nach deiner Güt” has some really interesting and pungent harmonies, while the soprano aria “Er kommt, er kommt, er is vorhanden!” features interwoven oboe lines with the solo, all above a steady walking bass, and here the instruments have a certain urgency that is shown in the sometimes easy, and sometimes gnarly passagework. The alto aria “Falsche Welt, dein schmeichelnd Küssen” is filled with twisting lines and chromatic turns, and the solo is particularly gripping, with some fine chromatically rising lines and fluid harmonic shifts. Thus endeth the first part, a good and solid neo-Baroque work.

The second part is more pointed towards the Passion itself. The opening alto aria (“Mein Tröster ist nicht mehr bey mir”) is actually a bit more gnarly than I would have expected, though there are certainly nice lyrical moments. Here, the departure from any relationship to Bach is clear; it is an effective bit of neo-Baroque writing, with a few modern touches. The long dialogue between the High Priest and the *turba* (crowd) moves along in a fluid manner, with a more pointed solo versus the chorus done in a more contrapuntal or perhaps imitative style, where the lines are quite chromatic and even a bit frenetic. This seems to outline the maddening folk, giving it a bit of a barbaric sound. This is offset by the usual instrumentally accompanied chorales, pieces of calm in the middle of the confrontation. This goes on for the bulk of the second part until the baritone aria “Will ich doch gar gerne schweigen,” a thinly textured aria for oboe da caccia and voice in which a central section is in a rather dance-like triple meter that contrasts with the flowing canonic and highly chromatic A sections. The final aria, “Angenehmes Mord-Geschrey!”, mirrors the last in its solo and ponderously accompanied wandering lines for oboe and violin. I’m not sure how a cry for murder (“Creutzige ihn”) can be “pleasant,” but this is a highly sensitive and reflective way to conclude the second disc.

The third disc focuses on the crucifixion in the usual series of recitatives with the Evangelist, along with the choral interplay. The first choral interjection, “Gegrüßet seyst du,” has a scurrying and insistent mocking figure in the instrumental part with a bit of swirling counterpoint. Scorn drips out of their jaunty lines that are not happy but jeering. It is clearly Baroque and modern at the same time, clearly a melding of compositional styles that is quite effective. The same sort of style permeates the remaining choruses of this section, almost frantic in their mockery, replete with fluid chromaticism. The tenor aria “Welt und Himmel nehmt zu Ohren” is suitably admonitory, with an imperious set of dotted rhythms and a majestic vocal line that seems like a proclamation. The actual funeral moment is outlined by a slow Sinfonia, where the instruments appear and float in a slowly whirling orchestral pool with some close harmonies and a distinctively neo-Romantic feel. The final chorus, “Bey deinem Grab und Leichen-Stein,” is a thoughtful Siciliano with a pastoral motion that gives a proper benediction.

The ensemble is entitled Gli Aspetti but the notes imply that it is “ad hoc,” meaning I suppose that it was pulled together for this event performance. The focus has to be on the music by Matthes, which as I’ve noted here and there is close to Baroque in style, perhaps even approaching Bach and some of his contemporaries (and one should remember that both Bach and Handel were not opposed to doing fairly much the same in their own borrowings). But there are moments where the style seems infused with a modern sense of harmony and rhythm, yet not without a fine sense of how such a text ought to be set. In short, this music serves Picander’s text excellently, and one would hope this work might continue to be performed as a fine piece in its

own right. It does not intend to be Bach, nor does it aspire to replace the now-lost *St. Mark Passion* that composer wrote, nor does it need to be seen as a sort of recomposition of Baroque music. Rather, it functions as a fine piece where Matthes has absorbed the idiom and reformatted it to serve the mood, substance, and feeling of the text. View it on its own merits, and you will find it to be an excellent and sensitive setting with an appropriate flavor of the time the text was written and yet absorbing in a fully modern venue. As a last note, both the orchestra, chorus, and soloists are all first-rate, and their interpretation has also lent support to the music itself. Well worth exploring. **Bertil van Boer**