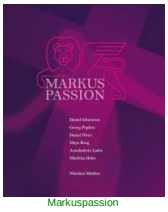
NIKOLAUS MATTHES *Markuspassion* • Nikolaus Matthes, cond; Maya Boog (sop); Annekathrin Laabs (alt); Daniel Johannsen, Georg Poplutz (*Evangelist*, ten); Daniel Pérez (*Christ*); Matthias Helm (*Petrus*, bar); Damiano Capelli (*Pilatus*); Luís Neiva (*Judas*); Gli Aspetti Ch & O • RESONANDO 10018 (3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



Markuspassion
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Back in issue 38:2 of *Fanfare* (Nov/Dec 2014), I published a fairly lengthy review of two different realizations of the *Markus-Passion* of Bach, for which only the libretto by Christian Friedrich Henrici (Picander) survives, with whatever music was used for it apparently being irretrievably lost. (The notes in the book accompanying the set under review here point out that it is not absolutely certain that the music was composed by Bach—he famously used the setting of another, not certainly identified composer for presenting a *St. Luke Passion*—but the default assumption is that he did write it himself.) My review listed the 16 realizations recorded to date at that time; since then I reviewed three more (in 39:1, 43:1, and 43:2). If one counts all of the live YouTube postings and duplicate issues listed at https://bach-cantatas.com/Vocal/ BWV247.htm, one gets an amazing total of 40 such versions. Wikipedia also gives a summary of the chief reconstructions at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Mark_Passion,_BWV_247.

All of those reconstructions are "parody" realizations; that is, they borrow music from other compositions of Bach (primarily cantatas, though also from his passions and oratorios) with note values, rhythms, and moods which seem to match (more or less) the words of Picander's texts for the arias and choruses; there is a consensus that the majority of such material is recycled from the 1727 *Trauer Ode*, BWV 198, which was a one-time-use work. The chorales in such realizations usually employ well-known standard Lutheran tunes as harmonized by Bach; the greatest degree of variation concerns the creation of the recitatives, which alternatively have been adapted from the *St. Matthew Passion*, written in a faux-Bach idiom, or (bizarrely, in my view) written in modern musical idioms having nothing to do with the Baroque. Picander's text survives in two variants, dating from 1731 and 1744; the latter, discovered in a St. Petersburg archive in 2009, contains two additional arias, and most reconstructions since then have followed that version.

What we have here, however, is something different. Nikolaus Matthes has instead chosen to take both the 1731 and 1744 versions of Picander's text and compose an entirely novel musical setting from start to finish. That, in and of itself, might not seem particularly daring. What is daring is that he has chosen to do so not in a present-day Postmodernist musical vocabulary, but rather in an uncompromising Bachian or neo-Bachian Baroque style. While Postmodernism has given license to composers to draw upon a wide-ranging array of musical genres for eclectic pastiches, the path that Matthes has chosen is still one that often is frowned upon. Even though it is now almost 40 years old, many of us still remember the storm of controversy and even denunciation that greeted Easley Blackwood when in 1985 he departed from his usual avant-garde idiom to write his Cello Sonata unabashedly in the voice of Schubert. Likewise, in 2002 Penderecki was subject to a campaign of public vilification for writing his Piano Concerto in a

neo-Romantic vein. The unforgiveable sin in modern artistic circles is seemingly not a lack of substance or quality, but an alleged lack of "originality" and a quality of being merely "reactionary" rather than progressive.

Fortunately, while such campaigns of calumny are not entirely *passé,* they are now less likely to gain traction, and there is now greater openness to judging a new work on its own merits, rather than conformity to a single dominant paradigm. So, just how good is Matthes's *Markuspassion?* Very good indeed—exceptionally good, I will boldly venture to say. It is one thing for composer X to create a new work in the style of previous composer Y—a fairly skilled composer who has devoted sufficient study to the work of a predecessor should be able to accomplish such a task with a creditable degree of proficiency. It is far more difficult, however, to accomplish such a task to the degree that only a very sharp professional ear could distinguish the new work as being in fact not a genuine creation of the preceding composer, not only because the latter style is so well captured but because the level of creative inspiration in the new work is so consistently high.

What Matthes has accomplished here is, astonishingly, on the latter rather than the former plane. Yes, there are elements that sound not quite like Bach; in particular, the recitatives have to my ears a subtle flavor that derives from 18th-century Italian opera as well as the German master. Also, the 30-piece musical ensemble, with strings, pairs of traverso flutes and recorders, four types of oboes, two types of bassoons, horn, lute, harpsichord, and organ, can sound a bit like Bach on HIP steroids rather than a standard HIP ensemble. (That many players would never have fit into the instrumentalists' loft at the Thomaskirche.) The chorus is a more standard 5/4/4/4 SATB group in size; members from it also sing all of the bit vocal roles except for Peter, who is assigned to baritone soloist Matthias Helm. But the totality is well balanced under Matthes's able direction, and powerfully caught by the recording (particularly strong in the bass register).

This live recording comes from the final dress rehearsal, and the first and last concert performances, given respectively in Zurich and Lucerne (the other two were given in Berne and Basel), the former on the 292nd anniversary of the 1731 Good Friday performance in Leipzig. Overall the performance is very fine, if not absolutely flawless. The soloists are mostly well-known singers in HIP performances in Europe. Matthes made a decision to divide the role of the Evangelist between two tenors; each one also sings one of the two tenor arias (Georg Poplutz the first, No. 9, and Daniel Johannsen the second, No. 46). As they alternate frequently, even within individual tracks of recitative, the libretto does not specify which tenor sings which words (perhaps color-coding of lines should have been considered for this purpose in printing the text). Both are excellent, but interestingly it is the veteran Poplutz who has the fresher and more plangent-sounding voice than his younger colleague. Daniel Pérez makes for an eloquent Christ, though some of his rapid passagework is a tad on the *sec* side. Alto Annekathrin Laabs is the standout who virtually steals the show, and Matthias Helm does yeoman's work in the two solo arias and as Peter. Luís Neiva as Judas and Damiano Capelli as Pilate are noteworthy among all of the fine singers in lesser roles. The one disappointment comes with veteran soprano Maya Boog, whose singing in her brief (2:47) first aria, "Er kommt, er kommt, er ist vorhanden!", is unpleasantly edgy and hooty in her upper register, while in her second and longer (6:27) aria, "Angenehmes Mord-Geschrey!", where the tempo is much slower, her top notes turn wobbly and do not sustain proper intonation. But nine minutes out of just over two hours is precious little to

find fault with. The instrumentalists and choristers are all superb; it seems almost unfair to single out some and not others, but concertmaster Germán Echeverri Chamorro and oboist Andreas Helm merit special mention. Throughout Matthes proves himself as able a conductor as he is a composer.

The set is a deluxe edition. A sturdy and attractively designed outer slipcase contains the three CDs in cutaway pockets in a slim trifold cardboard wallet. Along with this comes a 176-page hardbound, sewn trilingual German-Italian-English book with pages printed on heavy glossy paper and a page ribbon. The book successively contains a detailed table of contents; rosters of performers; list of tracks with timings; essays by Jörg-Andreas Bötticher, Roberto Bargellini, Pius Strassmann, and Nikolaus Matthes; an annotated, translated libretto that notes textual variants; artist bios; and various annotations, credits, thanks, and additional website links. The whole is lavishly illustrated with multiple photos of the performers by photographer Bettina Brotbeck. Be aware that the libretto preserves orthography of Picander's original text, with its antiquated spellings and odd habit of capitalizing the first two letters rather than just the first letter of certain words.

In sum, both the work itself and this performance are a complete triumph, and do full and worthy honor to Bach. I cannot think of higher praise than that. It is a positive joy to welcome this recording to my collection, and it is a strong candidate for my 2024 Want List. Urgently, emphatically recommended. **James A. Altena**