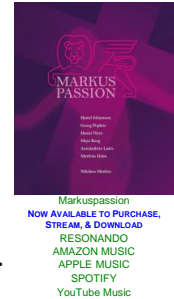


**NIKOLAUS MATTHES** *Markuspassion* • Nikolaus Matthes, cond;  
Maya Boog (sop); Annekathrin Laabs (alt); Daniel Johannsen, Georg  
Poplutz (*Evangelist*, ten); Daniel Pérez (*Christ*); Matthias Helm (*Petrus*,  
bar); Damiano Capelli (*Pilatus*); Luís Neiva (*Judas*); Gli Aspetti Ch &  
O • RESONANDO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



Taruskin, thou should'st be living at this hour! And so he isn't; he died nearly two years ago. But if ever there were a project meant for Richard Taruskin, it would be this one: a Passion setting to a libretto J. S. Bach probably set (but possibly didn't), music lost in any case, re-imagined by a young composer/conductor/dramatist for a Bach-sized period-instrument ensemble and choir, but only partially in Bach's style. And every jot and tittle of Bach's own manner observed, until it isn't. The pitch is low; all the players are "authenticists"; the self-consciously ad hoc orchestra and choir, assembled in Basel, make up a truly international coalition, comprising (going by names alone) most of the EU plus South Korea and Japan. The whole is under the direction of Nikolaus Matthes, the composer and "onlie begetter" of the entire enterprise. This is a gigantic project, carried out with scrupulous care.

My first reaction to the set was "this sounds *very* much like Bach." My second, about a minute after the first, was "No way would Bach have done any such thing!" after a wild lurch in the tonality. Those cropped up throughout—not so often as to cause disturbances, but certainly enough to make you realize, every moment, that you weren't listening to Bach, exactly. These moments are frequent, and they occur ever more often as the work progresses. The opening chorus of Part I merely switches violently from key to key. The closing chorus of Part I is an extraordinary thing: a sort of cortège, with the steady tramp of feet behind it, and the wailing of low double reeds about it.

I wouldn't put this past Bach. I wouldn't put much of anything past Bach, having experienced two things. One is Taruskin's *New York Times* article titled "Facing Up, Finally, To Bach's Dark Vision" (reprinted in *Text and Act*), which explains, basically, that Bach is not all "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring"; that a whole lot of Bach consists of things that your basic moderate American would shrink from, horrified. And the other was performing Bach's "Vernügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust," BWV 170. The first movement is pure bliss. The second is a tiny recitative, and then the third is basically a depiction of the terror of Hell. I don't know how else to describe it. There is the singer and the gibbering organ; there are two violins and viola in unison, treading in deadly fear; and then below us ... nothing at all but the abyss. I can't imagine a sermon that would convey that message more clearly than Bach did in notes. I *can* say that we strings were harrowed when we got off the stage.

Things get yet wilder in Part II, because Matthes has almost supernatural contrapuntal chops, and so the *turba* choruses are even crazier than Bach's own, which is certainly saying something. There is a Sinfonia towards the end (after Jesus' death) that is a horrifying depiction of unimaginable tragedy; and then, afterwards, a final chorus that is (improbably) in siciliano meter.

The closest equivalent to this that I can find is Edison Denisov's completion of Schubert's *Lazarus*. In that, as here, the sounds of Denisov are very much like those of Schubert, except when they aren't. That, too, is a magnificent work, not sullied by part of it having been composed by a composer long dead. Jörg-Andreas Bötticher writes: "Occasionally a turn of phrase reminiscent of Bach seems to shimmer through." No, it doesn't. Bach is the foreground, the palimpsest if you like. Matthes is the background, and he "shimmers through" constantly.

**Michelle Dulak Thomson**