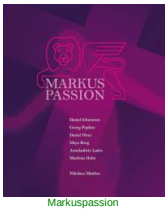
**NIKOLAUS MATTHES** ***Markuspassion*** • Nikolaus Matthes, cond; Maya Boog (sop); Annekathrin Laabs (alt); Daniel Johannsen, Georg Poplutz (*Evangelist*, ten); Daniel Pérez (*Christ*); Matthias Helm (*Petrus*, bar); Damiano Capelli (*Pilatus*); Luís Neiva (*Judas*); Gli Aspetti Ch & O • RESONANDO 10018 (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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Given the fascinating interview of Nikolaus Matthes by James Altena in 47:6 and excellent reviews of this German composer's St. Mark Passion (Markuspassion) by him and four others among my esteemed colleagues, the reader may legitimately wonder why I would have asked our obliging CEO for yet another copy of this set to review. My reasons are twofold: First of all, some readers may be aware that I am a composer whose most widely performed works tend to be those in what I call my "After" series, pieces I've deliberately written in the style of famous composers who preceded me, essentially what Matthes has attempted (and very successfully realized) in the present work. Actually, he is braver than I, because I've restricted my works "in the style of" to genres in which the composers I've imitated never wrote works. Thus, I've written saxophone works in the styles of Brahms, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, and others who didn't even know of the existence of the instrument, and a Rhapsody after Gershwin for violin and orchestra. With this restriction, my "After" works do not compete directly with actual works by the composers I'm imitating. (I would never write a Violin Concerto "after" Brahms, for instance!) Not so Nikolaus Matthes, who in his Markuspassion "competes" with Johann Sebastian Bach on his own turf. I should mention that my only attempts to imitate Bach's style came in a counterpoint class taken during my graduate studies at Indiana University, and the fugue and pair of two-part inventions I wrote as a requirement of that class cannot begin to compare with what Matthes has achieved in this magnificent undertaking. At least I know, understand, and love Bach's music, as I have throughout my entire life.

In the focus of my review here, I do not retread the ground so ably covered by my colleagues, including opinions about the quality of the performance (which I share). Thus, my second reason for writing a review of this set is that I desire to cover matters not addressed by my colleagues. These include describing what is involved in composing in the style of another composer whose style is exceedingly well known. Even more importantly, I want to explain why much of the music here so strongly resembles Bach's style, doing so through a discussion of Matthes's general approaches and afterward citing specific devices that he drew from his model. Right off the bat, I can state with some confidence two things about Nikolaus Matthes without ever having met him. First, he has listened to a lot of music by Bach, and secondly, he is blessed with an unusually keen ear, the latter being the most important tool a composer can possess. It is indeed possible that some of the technical devices I discuss below have not been consciously applied by him, but are only the result of his perceptive ear.

Before I began work on this review, I played the first two movements of the Markuspassion for my Bach-loving wife (who'd sung much of his music in her youth, and recorded some of it with Helmuth Rilling in Germany) and a visiting friend who is a well-known countertenor, a Bach

specialist, and who has recorded for several labels. I asked them to guess the composer, and both fairly quickly said “Bach.” The countertenor also immediately identified the work as a passion, but was puzzled by the fact he didn’t recognize it. He wondered if it might be the Brockes Passion of Handel since he didn’t know that work well. My wife was momentarily flummoxed by some of the “strange progressions” she heard, but quickly resolved her confusion by stating that Bach often used such things in his music. They were both amused and impressed when I told them the work was by a 21st-century composer imitating Bach’s style.

Matthes writes that he is skeptical that Bach was the composer of the music of the known performance of the setting of Picander’s St. Mark Passion on Good Friday, March 23, 1731. A counterargument to this may exist in the fact that Bach’s obituary stated that he was the composer of five passions. Three of the five were likely the St. John and two versions of the St. Matthew; a later version of the latter was rewritten to employ only one choir and was found in the catalog of the library of C. P. E. Bach. The fourth may refer to the St. Luke Passion, which although now proven to have been composed by an unknown contemporary rather than Bach, may have confused the writer of the obituary since Bach copied the work out in his own hand. For the fifth passion, then, we are left with two possibilities, namely that Bach did actually write music for a Markuspassion or, as is thought by some scholars, wrote a Passion during his Weimar years (1714–1717), a work which, if written, is now lost. But the truth is that it seems very unlikely that the composer of the work performed in 1731 will ever be known with any certainty.

I will begin my discussion of the Markuspassion of Nikolaus Matthes with broader considerations before I delve into specifics. In his scoring, he utilizes all of the instruments (and then some) that Bach employed in his two extant passions. These include traversos (transverse flutes), recorders, oboes, oboe d’amore, oboe da caccia, bassoon, contrabassoon, horn, lute, Baroque guitar, taille, viola d’amore, viola da gamba, violin, viola, cello, violone, harpsichord, and organ. Some of the above instruments were obsolescent by the time of the German master, and their inclusion gives even the Passions of Bach a somewhat archaic flavor.

The structure of the Markuspassion is akin to that of the St. Matthew Passion, each containing sections entitled respectively “before the sermon” and “after the sermon.” The reader should remember that passions (and other liturgical works in the Baroque era) were never given as concert performances, but always incorporated into actual worship services. It may be difficult for contemporary readers to imagine the patience of people of that time who would be sitting (or standing!) in a service lasting a good four or five hours, three of which would be taken up just by the St. Matthew Passion. Passions were incorporated into worship services on either Palm Sunday or Good Friday.

These works typically include scriptural narratives drawn directly from one of the four gospels and sung by an evangelist, choruses that contain dramatic action or comment upon it, arias based upon non-scriptural texts by the librettist focusing on some detail of the story, and finally chorales which are meditative reflections or responses. The tunes of the latter were invariably written by earlier composers, and harmonized and arranged by Bach—and now, Matthes. Words spoken by Jesus himself in certain recitatives incorporated strings on long note values in addition to the traditional basso continuo instruments (bassoon, harpsichord, organ, etc.) The effect of the

added strings produces a kind of "halo" around Jesus's words, something that Matthes was careful to preserve in his settings. The chorale tunes in passions of the era were often repeated with varying harmonizations and textures. In the St. Matthew Passion, one hears repetitions of the chorale O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden (O Sacred Head Now Wounded) with considerable variety in harmonization and texture, a characteristic superbly mimicked by Matthes in his exemplars.

Bach is famous (to musicologists, at least) for his word-painting and frequent use of Baroque-era affectations. These include the use of the falling interval of the major or (especially) minor second to portray woe or grief, the use of chromaticism to indicate agony (particularly that of Jesus upon the cross), rising musical lines with a climactic sustained high pitch representing an ascent to heaven, and even musical representations of specific objects. An example of the latter is found in Bach's cantata Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen (I will gladly carry the cross-staff) wherein, in its first recitative, a repeating undulating accompanimental pattern of 16th notes represents the Wellen (waves) mentioned in its text. Emotionally charged words such as "crucify" or Jesus's apocalyptic prophecies are often accompanied by diminished seventh chords and unexpected modulations.

In their arias, Bach (and Matthes following him) often features obbligato instruments that are used as equal partners with the solo voice, interweaving the lines of the two in skilled contrapuntal fashion. The choruses representing the crowds speaking (known to musicologists as turba choruses) are usually accompanied by the full orchestra and are often the dramatic highpoints of the passions by Bach (and, of course, Matthes). Another evocative example of Bach's symbolism comes during the five iterations of the "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden" chorale in St. Matthew Passion. Each successive reiteration removes one accidental from the first-employed key signature of E Major (four sharps) so that by the last one it is reduced to A Minor, which contains no accidentals at all. Such a device depicts Bach's theological conviction concerning his Lord's emptying himself in the incarnation and giving himself up for his people on the cross. Thereby Bach's faith is portrayed even in the key structures of the chorales.

The preceding illustrations provide some idea of what must be considered on the macro level by anyone who would imitate Bach's style. Before I launch into the more specific techniques that Matthes has drawn from his predecessor, I need to apologize to general readers that parts of the following discussion will necessitate the use of terms and symbols from music theory. Those I mention require only a rudimentary knowledge of the subject, but interested readers who do not possess such may surely find the concepts explained in numerous places on the internet.

Bach's style jumps out to the auditor from the very first measures of the opening chorus (No. 1) of the Markuspassion. Its first two measures remain ensconced on a pedal note of B, the tonic pitch of the key of B Minor that opens the work. During these measures, a progression of four chords in various inversions and tonal centers occurs. The pedal note continues through measure three, but over it Matthes places a C♯-Major triad, which in traditional music theory notation would be written V2/V, a shorthand way of referring to the secondary dominant of the V7 ("five-seven") chord in third inversion. Matthes, like Bach, well understands that the seventh of any chord, no matter what its position in the chord, creates a very strong auditory desire to hear it resolve downward by a step. This downward pull takes the bass line first to A♯ (to the first

inversion of the dominant chord of F♯-Major), and through another chord, the bass line is brought chromatically down to G♯. Such a descending chromatic bass (or other) line in a Baroque passion strongly foreshadows of the death of Jesus on the cross. Once Matthes arrives, then, to F♯ (the dominant), he brings the bass line back up to A and lowers it again in stepwise fashion through a different technique involving a series of suspensions, which also dictate a downward movement of the bass line since the dissonant suspended note is in each case the bass pitch.

These examples hint at but a small portion of the technical skill of bass-line and harmonic movement that Matthes was required to have mastered from knowing the works of Bach, who constantly used the techniques that I've described. Note that my analysis above has been considerably abridged and simplified in the interest of not bogging the reader down in an undue amount of theoretical harmonic analysis. I should also mention that, with my sense of absolute pitch, I heard the entire Passion a semitone below the actual written pitches since the composer has tuned his orchestra to A=415 (the Baroque tuning, more or less—tuning was anything but standardized in that era) instead of to A=440 (or higher), the contemporary standard.

I will cite but one additional example of Matthes successfully imitating Bach's harmonic movement (which conveys a large portion of his style to any listener). In the conclusion of the first of Matthes's chorales (No. 3), instead of resolving from the dominant chord to the expected tonic (V-I), the harmonic progression suddenly swerves into the secondary dominant of the IV chord (V/IV), leading to a closing plagal cadence (IV-I) instead of what theoreticians call a full, authentic, or perfect terminal cadence (the terminology differs, depending at which university one studies music theory). Such a momentary surprise to the listener was used by Bach on more than one occasion in his own chorales.

An example of word-painting that ties in the work of Matthes to Bach is found in the first recitative (No. 2a). The piece opens with traditional recitative writing, but when he comes to the phrase "And the high priests and scribes sought how they might take him by craft and put him to death," Matthes introduces a fully diminished seventh chord, notable because it contains the interval of not one but two tritones (a diminished fifth, thus providing the name of the chord). By the Baroque era the tritone had become known as diabolus in musica (the Devil in music), and Bach and his contemporaries used it to portray ominous things, danger, and the like. In the next section of this piece (No. 2b), Matthes brings in the chorus at a significantly faster tempo (again, a practice of Bach in many of his recitatives) to express in music the fact that these religious leaders were afraid of the people, causing them to forego taking action against Jesus on a feast day. Matthes also turns to the diminished seventh chord in No. 10, a recitative wherein Jesus states, "All ye shall be offended because of me," as well as in other appropriate places thereafter.

The composer uses the da capo (A-B-A) aria structure—ubiquitous in Baroque music—in about half of his arias (beginning in No. 9). In these, he matches the practice of Bach (and others) in considerably slowing the tempo at the end of the "B" section, which usually ends on the dominant chord before reverting to the A section, a tempo in the tonic key. In Baroque practice, the ornamentation of the obbligato instrument in the arias was often improvised by the performer, and it is possible that Matthes allows this by his performers as well. The traverso part in the first tenor aria (No. 9) particularly suggests an improvisatory treatment. Answering my

inquiry, Matthes told me the traverso part was actually written in every detail and therefore not improvised at all, but confirmed that he has followed Baroque practice in having the harmonic continuo players (harpsichord, organ, lute) improvise their parts from figured bass notation. It is fortunate that certain schools of music still teach this largely forgotten art, which the performers on this recording clearly have mastered.

Some of the turba choruses representing the reaction of the populace during the crucifixion (31b, for example) have the chorus confined to short phrases (e.g., "Prophesy"), well demonstrating Matthes's contrapuntal dexterity. Another very Bach-like device comes in the second baritone aria (No. 36) in which the ascending and descending forms (differing in the sixth and seventh scale degrees) of the melodic minor scale are closely juxtaposed. Matthes has immersed himself in the sound of Bach so thoroughly here (and elsewhere) that 99+% of listeners would not guess that they were hearing someone other than the master of Weimar and Leipzig.

A minor surprise comes in two of the chorales, namely No. 32, where the listener hears the tune of O Sacred Head Now Wounded, setting the German text "Du edles Angesichte" (Thou noble countenance) and soon afterward No. 42, which sets "Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn" (And though they would forget the Word"), the fourth verse of Martin Luther's even better-known hymn A Mighty Fortress is Our God. A somewhat bigger surprise greets the auditor beginning in No. 46 (a tenor aria). That and the next few pieces evince a shift towards a more modern style. Heretofore, there are occasional hints of Matthes being a later composer, mainly because of shifting to distant key areas in ways that Bach would likely not have done, or the non-Bachian use of parallel octaves in one section of an otherwise contrapuntal aria. In these pieces, he brings in elements from 19th- or even early 20th-century writing that Bach simply could not have written. These include the use of a horn solo in a type of use foreign to Baroque practice, or the depiction of the rending of the Temple curtain as Jesus died, which employs rather scary word painting through quite contemporary sounds and effects in the lower instruments. These "modern" (albeit, only in a relative sense) movements may provide some insight into what the music of this contemporary German master might sound like when he's not channeling Bach, but none of the movements sounds out of place in the work as a whole. "Bach" returns in good measure, however, in the closing chorus (No. 50).

What Nikolaus Matthes has achieved in this work is nothing short of breathtaking, and he has given music lovers a great gift in writing it. As a Christian, I found this work not only a magnificent musical experience, but also a profoundly moving opportunity for worship. I trust that sooner rather than later this work will receive the wide performance it deserves. In the meantime, I can only add my voice to the chorus of my colleagues who have sung the praises of this masterful work. In the original version of this review (prior to my contacting him), I included a request of the composer, "Herr Matthes, won't you now give us the completion of Bach's The Art of Fugue (Contrapunctus XIX)?" In the subsequent email exchange that the two of us had, I discovered he had recently done exactly that. So, since it seems as though he had read my mind there, I'll get greedy and ask him to expand his horizons and provide a new completion of Mozart's Requiem! Regardless, the reader will find the present set on my Want List for 2024 to underscore my conviction of its status as an essential acquisition by any music lover. **David DeBoor Canfield**