

**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, in Leipzig, there was a performance of a *St. Mark Passion*, a setting of a text by Picander (Christian Friedrich Henrici). The Picander text, with some modifications, was performed again in Leipzig in 1744. Picander was the author of the text for Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and various other works. There has long been the assumption, though not a conclusive one, that Bach composed the music for this *St. Mark Passion*. Unlike the scores for the Bach *St. John* and *St. Matthew Passions*, the music for the *St. Mark Passion* seems to have been forever lost. Given the prevalence of chorales in the *St. Mark Passion* text (16), alongside only two choruses and six arias (two more were added for the 1744 version), the further assumption has been that Bach repurposed music from earlier compositions for the Picander text, a common process of the time known as "parody." As James A. Altena writes in his superb overview of reconstructions and recordings of the Bach *St. Mark Passion* (*Fanfare* 38:2, Nov/Dec 2014), the work "is the great white whale of the Bach corpus. No other missing composition of Bach has been the subject of so much speculation, or the object of so many attempts at reconstruction of its music to match its surviving text." In his review, Altena outlines reconstructions that draw upon various other Bach works, as well as music newly composed by him, and/or by Bach contemporaries.



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German composer Nikolaus Matthes (b. 1981, Berlin) decided to take a different (and perhaps for some, audacious) approach: "I arrived at the idea of composing a completely new version, in which no pre-existing music by Bach is used—with the exception of some expressly employed quotations—but in which for the first time since Bach's and Picander's time, and with conscious reference to Bach's musical language, Picander's entire text should be set anew and thus be made accessible in its entirety. The result is a contemporary work written in baroque style and employing the orchestra as well as the musical and stylistic means of the 18th century." Matthes decided to divide the Evangelist's text between two tenors (although he allows for the possibility of one singer delivering the entire narrative). Matthes assigned the eight arias equally among the soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone soloists. Symmetry is created by placing the tenor arias near the beginning and end of the work, with the alto arias in the middle. In the 16 chorales, Matthes preserves the original melodies. At times, chorales appear in other parts of the music as well. As in the Bach *St. Matthew Passion*, Matthes sets Jesus's words as string-accompanied recitative.

I don't fancy myself an authority on the Bach *St. John* and *St. Matthew Passions*. But I did study them intensely, particularly in conjunction with Atlanta Symphony performances of the works, when I was the orchestra's program annotator. To my ears, the Matthes *St. Mark Passion* brilliantly evokes the music of Bach's era. There are on occasion modulations and dissonances that might well have shocked listeners of Bach's day. Likewise, the wrenching chromatics and

roaring contrabassoon in the alto aria “Falsche Welt” would be impactful in any era. I’m reminded of Prokofiev’s conceit in the creation of his “Classical” Symphony, a symphony in the style of Haydn: “If Haydn had lived in our era, I thought, he would have retained his compositional style but would also have absorbed something from what was new.” But I never found these moments starkly anachronistic, and they are always purposed to illuminate Picander’s text. Overall, the Matthes *St. Mark Passion* triumphs as “a contemporary work written in the baroque style.” It also is a gripping musical and dramatic experience, one that proceeds with arresting momentum. All credit is due to the superb team of Baroque vocalists and instrumentalists Matthes assembled and conducted in the performances and recording of his *St. Mark Passion*.

The recording is first-rate, as is the packaging. The CD box includes a slip case for the discs, as well as a separate hard-bound book that includes various essays, artist bios and photos, and complete German texts, with Italian and English translations. Annotations identify differences between the 1731 and 1744 librettos. This is a quite remarkable and endlessly fascinating achievement. **Ken Meltzer**