

On the St. Mark Passion

Dating from 1731 and 1744 respectively, two slightly different libretto versions of a Passion Music after the Gospel of St. Mark have come down to us; apparently, this Passion Music was performed in those years in Leipzig. Christian Friedrich Henrici, known as Picander (1700–1764), combined the Passion narrative from the Gospel of St. Mark with Lutheran chorales of various literary provenance, poetized the verses to the opening and final choruses and the arias himself, and thus created his very own “St. Mark Passion” libretto.

Regrettably, no music to Henrici’s libretto has survived, and no name of any composer appears in any of the written sources known today. But despite all that, there has been wishful thinking (and even the consensus) that Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) had put Henrici’s libretto to music. And therefore, excerpts from other works by Bach, which metrically fit the corresponding pieces in Henrici’s libretto, have repeatedly been pulled up for “reconstructions” of a hypothetical Bachian “St. Mark Passion” – simply because no original musical scoring exists.

This was the source situation I encountered in spring 2019 when I first toyed with the idea of setting Henrici’s complete text to music. Henrici had it first printed in 1732, in the 3rd part of his *Ernst-Schertzhafte und Satyrische Gedichte* (Seriocomic and Satirical Poems), and I wanted to set it in the musical language of Johann Sebastian Bach – although up until this day nobody can know with certainty whether Bach has ever composed any music to Henrici’s text.

Today, I am unable to recall the precise trigger which led me to do this work. But I am sure that I was tempted to see the gap in the written tradition as a challenge – and to try to discover what effect and impact the setting of Henrici’s text in a baroque musical language would have in our time. I was aware of the fact that no one to this day has published a completely new composition on that text, and we don’t even know if it has ever been set to music. With that in mind, and with all my knowledge of Bach’s musical language, I wanted to try to speak the baroque musical language in such a way that the music evolving from this process makes it possible to really experience and witness that language – or, at least, to recognize it as a musical “dialect”.

I have always been taken with this uniquely Bachian “music dialect”. In my opinion, it is without parallel – an inimitable and matchless phenomenon to which I have always been drawn. And despite my decades-long listening experience, I feel unable to describe its essential characteristics or sounds, let alone any rules or even a “grammar”. However, I am quite sure that this dialect must have something to do with the inseparable and, ultimately, “cosmic” oneness of music and what it is to be human. To me, this oneness is perceivable in the sounds of this dialect – which is probably the only dialect in music history to sound so utterly close to our humanness, embracing it so lovingly, yet so unforgiving and dispassionate in all its nuances, its constrictions and freedoms, its highs and lows.

I did not feel daunted by the work which the composition and arranging a premiere would require – in fact, quite the opposite. Moreover, the pleasure of setting Henrici’s text to music was exciting to me, regardless of whether I was the first composer to do so or if, back then, others might have had similar plans. I neither referred to any versions of an alleged Bachian “St. Mark Passion” already existing (which often have been catalogued as “BWV 247”), nor did I base my work upon them. I deliberately began to study those versions only after I had completed my own setting.

Many of the above-mentioned versions are labelled with the term “reconstruction”. This is because they are all based on two assumptions which are unprovable up to the present day: first, that Henrici’s libretto of the “St. Mark Passion” was with certainty set to music by Johann Sebastian Bach; second, that Bach had used some of his own music, composed at an earlier stage, as “parody template” – from his “Trauerode” (BWV 198, 1727), among other pieces – and incorporated this music into his “St. Mark Passion”. Usually, reconstructions have been based on those pieces.

For many reasons, I do not share these assumptions. One of the reasons why I did not pursue them any further was because it was part of the musical challenge to neither make any use of any of Bach’s works nor of the works of any other composers, except for some explicit and short quotations. Instead, I wanted to write a completely new Passion Music: a piece which would allow both the musician and the listener to get as close as possible to the adventure and the experience of a baroque premiere.

My personal connection with the musicians of the premiere was in direct interplay with the genesis of the composition. Virtually all of the vocal and instrumental parts were shaped by my relationship with the musicians for

whom I wrote them. Furthermore, over the span of several years, we had the good fortune to carefully and meticulously form an ensemble of all the musicians I wished to be participants of the premiere. Only after this ensemble was complete, with all its ideal candidates, did we schedule the concert dates.

From March 23 until March 26, 2023, we gave the first performances of the Markuspassion, in Zurich, Bern, Basel and Lucerne, Switzerland. In the 10 days preceding these performances, we were able to exclusively rehearse the new piece with the ensemble described above. Thus, we committed to an undertaking whose results were unknown to any of the participants.

A relatively quick and intense composition process and three years of scrupulous preparation preceded the four-concert premiere: After I had sketched the first draft on April 26, 2019, there was a long break; the largest part of work on the composition followed from December 23, 2019, until April 10, 2020. Some pieces were re-composed or replaced at a later stage, one was newly added, and persistently, there were revisions, corrections and refinements. Finally, in February 2022, all the musicians, participants and associates got their scores and parts. The first sheet music edition consisted of 115 handcrafted volumes: 40 full scores and 40 vocal scores, 4 conductor scores, and 31 instrumental parts. We then had about a year to dedicate ourselves to our own preparations.

In the rehearsals, all the paths converged, and already in our first encounters we managed to evoke a sense of togetherness and an ensemble spirit which gave us wings and, regardless of the hard work, led us to meet every musical difficulty almost in a playful way. The fact that there was never any resentment, displeasure, or hostility, empowered us with courage, confidence and joy.

The step from the rehearsal space to the concert stage was almost weirdly natural, for our community had become so natural to all of us. Together, we discovered the Markuspassion; we experienced it, we shaped, forged and exhausted it, suffered in it and rejoiced over it again – and, thus, became familiar with each other through these experiences, in both human and musical terms. It seemed the most obvious and natural thing to play music together; our labour was characterized by a constant give-and-take, a soulful and peaceful listening to each other in every moment, completely open and with unconditional respect for one another. Not a single moment was governed by the force of habit; each moment was fresh and new. So it happened that a dear colleague, to whom I described our working conditions, observed that, in our labour, we had found a “common refrain of life”. And Carlos Kleiber’s wish, which he once expressed to his musicians in a rehearsal: “Ich möchte Sie immer beim Vergnügen beobachten!” (I always want to watch you all enjoying!), has been fulfilled for me in a particular and particularly striking way; rarely have I enjoyed life so much as in those days and weeks when we rehearsed and performed in March 2023.

An enthusiastic, curious and open-minded, grateful audience attended the first concerts, and an outstanding recording producer, unique in every regard, captured the dress rehearsal and the Zurich and Lucerne concerts in such a way that we could create a vital, thrilling audio recording. A Basel-based graphic designer gave our CD and the whole project its visual appearance; two wonderful wordsmiths translated the texts of the CD book (including Henrici’s libretto) into the Italian and the English languages, and thus, one year after its premiere, the Markuspassion made its way across the borders of Switzerland and into the world.

The response to our recording, which, thanks to the work of a consummate executive producer and a congenial agency, rose almost exponentially within days and weeks after the release of the CD, was overwhelming. The Markuspassion was, all of a sudden, of so much public interest that we began to think about further performances. So, I began to incorporate all the corrections made in the 2023 rehearsals and performances into the sheet music, and in close and productive collaboration with the printing company Kreiter, Wolfratshausen (Germany), we published the second sheet music edition. Hereafter, the work can now develop a life of its own.

Our “common refrain of life” was at first transmitted to the concert audience and, later on, to the listeners who heard our recording in public broadcast or from the CD. I am deeply grateful for their response – and for the help of all the dear people who have contributed to the Markuspassion, who supported our work and made it at all possible. For future performances, I wish everyone will enjoy equally nice conditions: fabulous musicians, generous support, joy in the mutual experience of the musical work, broad and harmonious resonance – and a peaceable, kind and loving human cooperation and togetherness.

In this spirit, the composition is now committed to the public in its printed form.

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