

RECORDINGS

Bach's St. Matthew Passion for Easter

J.S. Bach's setting of the Passion according to St. Matthew, is one of the most powerful statements of the principles of Christianity. Johannes Somary's 1977 Vanguard recording, just issued on compact disc by Omega, is among the few to have done justice to Bach's work.

The conducting is broad and strong, and the voicing is distinct, with both of the double choruses heard with clear separation. The different musical choirs represented by the soloists, the orchestra, and the two choruses are given plenty of room to breathe. The vocal soloists, including tenor Ernst Haefliger and baritone Benjamin Luxon, sing with tremendous poetic understanding.

The power of Bach's "Matthäus-Passion" derives from the power of Good Friday itself, the day of the crucifixion. Drawing on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Bach demonstrates the responsibility of each person who seeks God's gift of eternal life to cleanse his heart, and in imitation of Christ to *act* out of love for the benefit of mankind as a whole.

Of particular significance in this regard is the way in which Bach gives meaning to the beatitude from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, in which he says, "Blessed are the clean of heart,

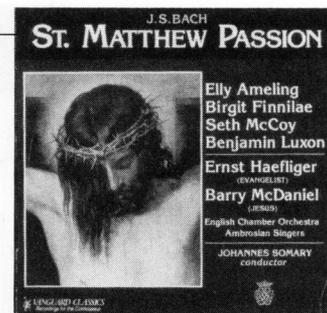
for they will see God." (Mt. 5:8)

Human Singing Voice

Bach accomplishes this by his use of the *registers* of the individual human singing voice. The best way to approach the whole work is from the final bass solo No. 65, "*Mache dich, mein Herze, rein.*" It is not only the last of many individual statements, but also Bach's final testament as to how the individual must view Jesus. Bach has therefore constructed many other movements of the Passion as variations of this aria, including the opening and closing choruses No. 1 and No. 78, which are based on it.

He gives this most profoundly beautiful song to Joseph of Arimathea, the follower of Christ, who begged Pontius Pilate for Jesus' body, so that he could bury him in his own tomb. "Make thyself, my heart, clean," Joseph tells himself, "for [there] I will bury Jesus."

Bach brings out the individuality of the human soul with his use of the bass's own specific registration. The bass shifts from its middle register, to its third or high register, which has a dramatically different sound, on the D above middle-C, which makes the bass totally distinct from soprano, tenor, or other voices.



Matthäus-Passion
by J.S. Bach, BWV 244
Johannes Somary, conductor
1977, Vanguard/Omega Classics
3 CD's, 4060-1-2, \$21.96

At first, Bach constructs a poetic dialogue, differentiating between Joseph and Christ. Joseph of Arimathea speaks of himself in the middle register, and then rises into the highest third register after repeated contemplation of Jesus (SEE Figure 1).

The aria continues at some length repeating these words, always reserving the few dramatic higher register notes for Jesus' name.

But, at the point where Joseph of Arimathea himself is transformed and makes a commitment to emulate Christ, Bach allows the "*ich*" ("I") of the singer to similarly rise into the highest register (SEE Figure 2).

Vanguard/Omega's Somary recording succeeds because conductor and soloists capture the poetry Bach's registers imply. Benjamin Luxon's Joseph gives precisely the right, understated but passionate poetic stress to the phrases highlighted by Bach as shown here, communicating the transformation of the individual soul.

He succeeds—as does most of the recording despite being at a pitch higher than Bach's—because he makes his voice match the poetry. Luxon is also a baritone, which is a higher voice than the bass for which Bach called, and so his voice registers match Bach's intentions.

Somary's generously broad tempo brings out Bach's orchestral bass continuo in such *legato* contrary-motion to singer and oboe da caccia soloists, as to make everything sound like the work of God.

—Kathy Wolfe



FIGURE 1. Aria "Mache Dich," opening. The grey boxes show where the voice rises into the highest register when singing of Jesus.



FIGURE 2. "Mache dich," conclusion. The singer's "I" finally rises to the high register.