



# Towards a Markus-Passion

*Malcolm Bruno* recounts the scholarship behind a recreation of J.S. Bach's lost work

Ten years ago I arrived at the much-esteemed Bachwoche Ansbach, near Nuremberg, to find the British musicologist Simon Heighes with his reconstruction of Bach's *Markus-Passion*. As little had been heard of the Markus after publication of a reconstruction by Diethard Hellmann in the 60s, the performance attracted much attention. Shortly after 1995 two newly published editions appeared and with recordings stirring interest, I too would be ineluctably drawn into the quest for this vanished Passion!

Though we know J.S. Bach's St John and St Matthew Passions to be two of his most cherished and seminal works, we are perhaps less aware that Bach composed considerably more passion music than these two monumental works.

According to his obituary in 1751, written by his most gifted son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, with the composer and musicographer Johann Friedrich Agricola, Bach composed no fewer than five passion settings, one of them with double choir. Aside from the St John and the double-choir St Matthew, one of these additional works was evidently an even earlier versified Passion-Oratorio from 1717 of which very little survives. The fourth was perhaps a Luke Passion that, having been copied out by Bach – though not composed by him – had not had its authenticity questioned even at the time of the first complete assembly of Bach's works, the Bach-Gesellschaft edition, begun in the mid-19th century. The fifth was a *Markus-Passion*, and of this Markus there was in the 19th century apparently no

*above* the winged lion, symbol of St Mark, looks down on Venice's famous piazza  
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further trace (in autograph or printed score), while in the 20th century the only known source was an incomplete copy in the hand of the singer and Bach manuscript collector Franz Hauser (1794–1870). It had not yet been scrutinised when, in 1945, it was tragically destroyed by fire at Weinheim/Bergstrasse during the second world war.

For the past century and a half, however, the notion that Bach's Markus must have been in large part a 'parody' work has become widely accepted. Recycling of musical material was common in the 18th century and often practised by Bach throughout his working life, including in the composition of his B minor Mass. With practical and personal circumstances in 1730 very likely conspiring against the creation of a completely new work for the Passiontide commission that year, it should come as no surprise that Bach could request

of his librettist Christoph Friedrich Henrici ('Picander') a small-scaled passion – only six arias and two principal choruses – for first performance on Good Friday 1731.

It was this view that came to light in the mid-19th century when Wilhelm Rust, an editor of the Gesellschaft edition, was first to realise that the basis for the Markus was the funeral music of 1727, or the *Trauerode* (BWV198). Having to hand the musical inventory of Bach's publisher Johannes Breitkopf, indexing not only the titles of works but their orchestrations, Rust's eye spotted that only two works – the Markus and the *Trauerode* – were scored for the unique combination of strings and winds with the addition of two viols and two lutes. With Picander's libretto extant from other 18th-century sources he was able to compare the opening chorus of the *Trauerode* with the Markus text.

below opening of the original  
Hellmann edition now  
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The scansion of text to music proved perfect not only for both opening and closing choruses, but as well for the Markus arias 'Er kommt', 'Mein Heiland' and 'Mein Troster'. In itself, however, the *Trauerode* musical text with only three arias was short of the total six needed to encompass the whole of Picander's libretto, and thus Rust's discovery would unleash years of musical detective work in search of further suitable parodies. The most important proposal in the century to follow was Friedrich Smend's unanticipated conclusion in 1940 that a fourth Markus aria, 'Falsche Welt, dein schmeichelnd Küssen', was based on the alto aria 'Widerstehe doch der Sünde' from Cantata 54, and this is now almost universally accepted as the likely source of Bach's original version.

The two remaining arias have proved more problematic. Although metrical counterparts in Bach's works have been identified, none has seemed as obvious a fit as those from the *Trauerode* or Cantata 54. Diethard Hellmann in 1964 published a first 'reconstruction' or assembly of a Markus based on the work of Rust and Smend, and included a setting of a fifth Markus aria, 'Welt und Himmel, nehmt zu Ohren', built on the soprano aria from Cantata 120a, 'Herr Gott, Beherrscher aller Dinge'. Although this parody cannot claim the definitive



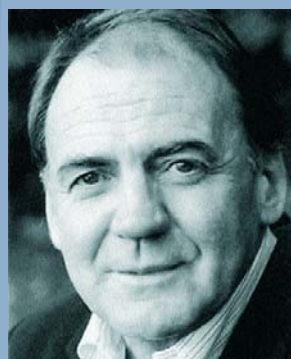
status of the others, it has much to commend it. With roots stemming originally from a violin sonata (BWV1019), its obbligato solo violin is reminiscent of 'Erbarme dich' from the St Matthew, though its graceful G major tonality opens up an entirely different, angst-free world. And perhaps its mood is not so far removed from Picander's affirmative text declaiming that through Jesus's death the fallen world of Adam is restored.

Recent British editors Anton Gomme and Simon Heighes follow their predecessors C.S. Terry and G.A. Theil in employing music for the sixth aria, 'Angenehmes Mord-Geschrei', from the inappropriately jolly Cantata 204, a parody rejected by both Smend and Hellmann and more recently by Andreas Glöckner. Musical settings for Picander's 16 chorale texts are meanwhile by comparison completely straightforward, with two sources now to hand: a collection published in 1784–87 by C.P.E. Bach, along with one of 149 four-part chorales by his father's pupil, John Ludwig Dietel. But the big missing piece of the puzzle with the opening and closing choruses, the chorales and the arias in place – even with the uncertainty of two of the aria parodies – is of course the Evangelist's recitative and the *turba* choruses. This dramatic material would, even by Bach, have had to be specific only to the original Markus and would not have been reconstructed from parodies.

It was some six years after the 1995 Ansbach performance that an opportunity for a theatrical Markus would focus my attention on these issues again first-hand. Though the idea of an 'operatic' staging of Bach was already familiar to me through Jonathan Miller's St Matthew Passion from the early 90s, a chance meeting in the autumn of 2001 with Kjetil Bang-Hansen, director of the National Theatre in Oslo, would open up a completely new solution to the missing drama of the Markus. A year earlier the distinguished Ibsen director had devised a one-man show using the biblical text of the whole of Mark's Gospel for one of the best-known actors in Scandinavia, Svein Tindberg. It was a striking if straightforward production, designed as a filler in Tindberg's busy schedule during the Lenten period, with Bang-Hansen imagining it to occupy a few dark nights in his theatre. But after its first weeks on stage, a surprisingly sold-out run was then extended, and in the following year a tour throughout Scandinavia captured an audience of some 90,000. Tindberg and Bang-Hansen were thus intrigued by my proposal that Picander's excerpt of their drama – the 14th and 15th chapters of Mark's Gospel – had a potential soundtrack by Bach already hovering in the wings for a much desired revival of their show. The successful marriage of drama and music led, after

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left stills from Malcolm Bruno's Norwegian production with actor Svein Tindberg Photo courtesy of NRK, right Evangelists (from top) Bruno Ganz Photo courtesy of Lucerne Festival 2005, Simon Russell Beale Photo Fatimah Namdar, Svein Tindberg Photo courtesy of NRK





Oslo performances the next spring, to a recording in 2002, subsequent filming for Norwegian television, and then a version for American radio with Simon Russell-Beale, whose revered Hamlet had taken him back to New York in 2003. This was followed by an invitation to the Lucerne Easter Festival in 2005 where the role of the Evangelist was taken by the celebrated German actor Bruno Ganz.

Although this sort of liturgical drama with music would not have been envisioned by Bach, it would offer an avenue into his wonderful 'miniature Passion' without resorting either to pastiche – the solution offered by Ton Koopman's fantasy Markus, that takes no account of its *Trauerode* origins – or to a setting of Picander's material borrowed from Bach's much lesser contemporary Reinhard Kaiser, which was the solution of Heighes and Gomme. This leaves performer and listener alike with the considerable disappointment of having Bach's lost music filled in at the dramatic high points with utilitarian inspiration at best. Of course, one might point out, the success of a spoken-word version depends upon having an exceptional Evangelist, but then no conductor would attempt a St John or St Matthew Passion without having found an outstanding tenor as the first step! And a beneficial by-product is the flexibility of language for the actor, as audiences in Norway and America have shown.

With the benefit of these performances and more coming up, I have had a chance to reconsider a version for publication with the *Trauerode* at the centre musically, as it must have been for Bach's Markus. I have therefore taken certain liberties in creating the final sequence, placing a total commitment to Bach's music above a literal and perhaps obsessive realisation of Picander's libretto. Chorales have therefore been deleted (neither of the other Passions has nearly as many!), because without the sung recitative and *turba* their special sense of

punctuating sections cannot be recaptured. Some of the arias have also been shifted in the final sequence to create a sense of dramatic proportion, and to avoid, for example, the two very lengthy alto arias coming in proximity. I have employed a sinfonia to mark the central portion of the Passion, originally occupied by a sermon, while Andrew Parrott has kindly allowed me to use his parody of the short chorus at the centre of the *Trauerode* from which so much of the other material is derived. With the inclusion of this brief chorus there is a rewarding sense of structure, with all the music of the *Trauerode* (except the recitative specific to it) being redeployed in this Passion. This chorus also makes a fine conclusion to the first part of the Markus.

Turning to the arias, aside from the three parodies from the *Trauerode* and 'Falsche Welt' from Cantata 54, I have found Hellmann's parody for 'Welt und Himmel' from Cantata 120a, if not authentic, admirably serviceable. While no musically plausible parallel to the final aria 'Angenehmes Mord-Geschrei' has been or is likely to be uncovered, I have opted to depart from Picander's libretto with two ideal dramatic imports from other cantatas, ensuring a solo presence, currently missing, that Bach most certainly would have had for the bass. I have, finally, along the lines of the *Trauerode*, rationalised the parts of lutes and viols within the context of the single-string texture of the original.

Those of us present in Ansbach ten years ago experienced the Markus in the context of a major Bach festival, including significant performances of both the B minor Mass and St Matthew Passion. It is in that context that we will always approach the Markus: before the great St Matthew, with double choir and double orchestra, and the swifter and more compactly moving St John, in its different versions, and indeed, in the final horizon of J.S. Bach's creativity, in his Mass. The enigmatic Markus remains the most intimate of all, though only partially in view to us, like an ancient torso not having survived the ravages of time; for the aristocratic beauty of the *Trauerode* and its orchestra of antique viols and lutes perseveres in its Markus-guise, giving us the most exquisite 'miniature' Passion imaginable. □

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*below* detail at the foot of  
St Mark, Westminster Abbey  
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