

## KARL RICHTER Bach - St. Matthen Passion

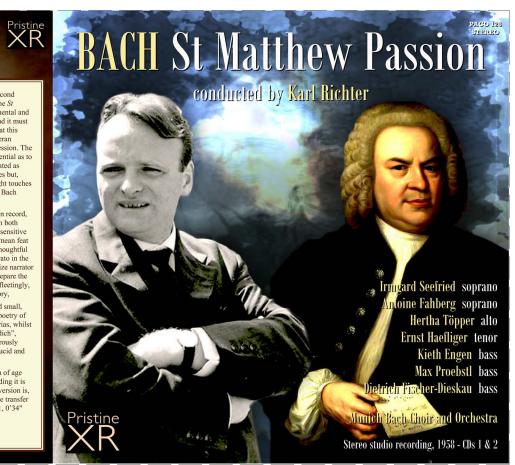
How often a maestro's return to his Alma Mater results in a pale reflection of previous glories-and how ironic it is that the second attempt often occurs because of the success of the original enterprise. This is certainly so in Karl Richter's two recordings of the St Matthew Passion, where the freshness and pure theatre of the first, made in 1958, yield to a luxuriant but comparatively sentimental and over-cooked account 18 months before Richter's death in 1981. Listening to the former in its re-released state is a revelation and it must surely glow as brightly as any great recording landmark of the 1950s. The 32-year-old Richter was at the height of his powers at this time. Committed to the spirit inhabited by his famous predecessor at St Thomas's and steeped in the intense and resolute Lutheran culture, he exhibits something of an unselfconscious obsession to deliver Bach's greatest rhetorical drama with profound expression. The scene is appropriately set in the opening chorus which unfolds deeply bowed and long-breathed and yet not so grave and reverential as to become oppressive as it does 20 years later. Similarly, the chorales here are forthright and highly-charged, direct and concentrated as opposed to ponderous and mannered in the later recording. It is hard to know which of the versions employs larger choral forces but, being Richter, neither is short of a full and muscular capacity. The difference, however, is that the earlier recording proffers light touches (try "Wo willst du", on the first disc, track 14) and a range of clear articulations in the crowd scenes which in the later Munich Bach Choir are obscured by turgid and cloying textures.

The solo singing is superior in almost all respects in the 1958 version. Kieth Engen is arguably the most memorable Christus on record, with a gravitas and constancy of tone which give him an authority and nobility of great distinction. Fischer-Dieskau appears on both recordings, in the first case singing the arias of which "Komm susses" and "Mache dich" are delectable; the latter aria with its sensitive shading and immediacy of dialogue with the strings is exceptionally moving. Fischer-Dieskau's Christus, 21 years later, is no mean feat either. As one of the few consistently good points of the later set he delivers a measured and sophisticated performance, ever thoughtful and rarely soupy. Matti Salminen, meanwhile, takes the arias with none of Fischer-Dieskau's earlier finesse; his quivering vibrato in the upper register is disconcerting to say the least and he lacks, here, the ability to see beyond the next line. Ernst Haefliger is a prize narrator as the Evangelist, austere when required and yet able to impart a clarity of nuance to consolidate on a prevailing Affekt or to prepare the way forward, whilst Schreier (on the later set) can seem a little static by comparison. Haefliger is not afraid to show, however fleetingly, that his role can extend into an intimate commentary of a narrator unashamedly moved by the uniqueness of his remarkable story,

Richter's earlier performance also has the advantage of using seven as opposed to five singers to cover the solo parts, great and small, and this contributes to a keener sense of characterization generally, leaving Irmgard Seefried and Hertha Töpper to render the poetry of the arias with detached eloquence. Both voices in fact show the age of the recording, as indeed do some of the tempos in the arias, whilst almost everything else appears strangely timeless. Töpper is her usual doleful self with a superb richness of tone in "Erbarme dich", whilst Seefried goes through periods of devastating effectiveness and others best forgotten ("Ich will dir mein Herze" is dangerously fiat). Neither the reliable Edith Mathis nor Dame Janet Baker (whose intonation too is not beyond reproach) can summon the lucid and vital expression from Richter's yesteryear.

In conclusion then; there are few, if any, finer version of the Matthew Passion on disc and despite the few inevitable blips born of age and changing tastes, this is a monumental achievement. If there is one overriding and irresistible sensation to this classic recording it is Richter's extraordinary ability to juxtapose dramatic tension and momentum with warmth and dignified composure. The later version is, at its best, reflective but in its sluggishness and self-conscious emoting lacks that elusive combination of vigour and vision. The transfer sound from 1958 is mainly good, though there is of course some hiss and a slightly sinister, but minor, 'jump' on disc 1 track 1, 0'34" and track 29 4'05" on 1 he same disc.

J F-A, Gramophone Review of Arkiv CD reissue, June 1994



**BACH ST. MATTHEW PASSION** 

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Ernst Haefliger, Tenor (Evangelist, Arien) Kieth Engen, Bass (Jesus) Irmgard Seefried, Sopran (Arien) Antonie Fahberg, Sopran (1. Magd, Pilati Weib) Hertha Topper, Alt (Arien, 2. Magd) Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Bass (Arien)

Max Proebstl, Bass (Judas, Petrus, Pilatus, Hohepriester)

Walter Theurer, Wolfgang Haag, Querflöte I/II Edgar Shann, Oboe Edgar Shann, Kurt Hausmann, Oboe d'Amore I/II Otto Büchner, Violine Oswald Uhl, Viola da Gamba Continuo: Oswald Uhl, Violoncello Karl Kolbinger, Fagott • Franz Ortner, Kontrabass Ekkehard Tietze, Hedwig Bilgram, Orgel Münchner Chorknaben • Einstudierung Fritz Rothschuh Münchener Bach-Chor Münchener Bach-Orchester

Karl Richter

## Producer's note

Karl Richter's classic 1958 St. Matthew Passion is a fabulous demonstration of just how good some of the earliest commercial stereo recordings of the late 1950s could sound. It appears on the Pristine label almost by chance - chosen as listening material whilst testing new LP replay equipment. I was so drawn into the music that I couldn't help but let it run, and run. All eight sides of it demonstrated to me how much superior the best vinyl pressings of the pre-CD era sound by comparison to almost every modern "vinyl revival" LP I've heard thus far. Thus I had marvellous source material from which to work: XR remastering has served to "warm up" the sound, as well as dusting off the upper-end cobwebs, whilst the tape hiss which has bothered listeners to earlier reissues has been all but eliminated. The lightest touch of convolution reverberation, which reproduces the acoustic space and characteristics of a real selected concert hall, has served to soften some of the rougher edges of DGG's early stereo sound and bring an extra sense of depth and realism to the proceedings

Andrew Rose

