**BACH *Matthäus-Passion,*** BWV 244(Mendelssohn version, Bärenreiter edition, ed. Bruno / Ritchie).**** Christopher Jackson, cond; Dann Coakwell (*Evangelist*, ten); William Sharp (*Jesus*, bar); Clara Rottsalk (sop); Luthien Brackett (mez); Isiah Bell (ten); Enrico Lagasca (bass); The Bach Ch of Bethlehem; Bach FO **** ANALEKTA 953 (two discs: 125:23) Live: Packer Memorial Church, Bethlehem, PA, 11/1-4/2023

This is the first recoding, taken from a succession of live performances, of the new Bärenreiter edition of Bach’s masterpiece the *Matthäus-Passion* edited by Malcolm Bruno and Caroline Ritchie. There is a real mythos around Mendelssohn’s “rediscovery” of Bach, itself significantly influenced by Mensdelssohn’s Bach-adoring teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter. Mendelssohn was gifted a copy of the *Matthäus-Passion* at the age of 14; the first performance in then-modern times took place in 1829. A dozen years later, Mendelssohn tried again with what he called the “Große-Passions Musik," reinstating some arias deleted in 1829 and revising the secco recitative. This 1841 version presents approximately two-thirds of Bach’s original, The new Bärenreiter edition brings together what Mendelssohn's sketched (the second version was a work in progress) and includes supplements to other parts by the editors, allowing for a full performing edition. Also reflecting Mendelssohn’s decisions, here clarinets replace oboes d’amore; the score also includes suggestions for the missing continuo part (which was begun for the Thomaskirche organ but was lost).

Underpinned by a positively chthonic bass, the journey begins with “Kommt ihr Töchter” takes on massive solemnity; but not, thankfully, with a surfeit of mock gravitas in this Bethlehem performance: the combined forces hits the target perfectly on the Bach/Mendelssohn axis. Textures are clear; and when the Evangelist sings (the excellent Dann Coackwell), accompaniment shifts first to fortepiano, then to a halo of strings prior to the chorale, “Herrliebster Jesu”. New colors abound. Coakwell narrates superbly well throughout, each word perfectly enunciated without an ounce of over-emphasis (my last live performance of this was at Aix-en-Provence, France, with Ian Bostridge as Evangelist, an account that threatened at one point to take us into Expressionist territory: within the auspices of an original instrument performance with Les Talens Lyriques and the Namur Chamber Choir, conducted by Christophe Rousset on 4/7/2023, almost exactly a year before I type these words). Perhaps Coakwell’s finest hour is immediately preceding the aria “Erbarme dich,” the description of the cock’s crowing, a moment of complete alignment with Bach, Mendelssohn and depicted event.

The Jesus here is William Sharp. Not only is he firm of voice, his is secure across his entire range. Mezzo Luthien Brackett takes the alto “Du lieber Heiland du” and the succeeding “Buß und treu” with real skill, the two flutes of the Bach Festival Orchestra adding two delicious lines, perfectly judged; voice and flutes are perfectly separated in Analekta’s sound picture. The mezzo “Ach Golgotha” from the work’s second part is another noteworthy moment, an aria full of pain-writ-large at the thought of the death of the Saviour.

Dramatic interactions and illustrations between Evangelist and soloists are finely preserved, replicating the spatial aspects that must have been very much part of the Bethlehem (PA) experience. Christopher Jackson’s pacing is beautifully sensitive, too, allowing a little more rubato as cadences approach via the “Mendelssohn loophole,” perhaps. It works, and beautifully so. The ”other” tenor, Isiah Bell, sings beautifully in “Ich will bei meinem Jesus wachen,” his voice beautifully free in the melismatic passages.. Brackettt’s voice works superbly well with the purity of soprano Clara Rottsolk in the duet towards the end of Part I, ”So ist mein Jesu nun gefangen” (and how lacerating the choral interjections later on in this segment). Rottsolk shines in “Erbarme dich” (normally heard via alto, of course), wherein Mendelssohn also takes the violin obbligato upwards, perhaps Heavenwards. Elizabeth Field, the Concertmaster of the Bach Festival Orchestra, is brilliantly accurate in her contribution there. True, who could forget Dame Janet Baker in this (Munich Bach Orchestra and Karl Richter) or, indeed, counter-tenor Damien Guillon in Masaaki Suzuki’s most recent BIS version with the Bach Collegium Japan? But in context this new version is completely convincing; as is the sheer joy exuded by the bass aria (again featuring Field, now in full-on virtuoso mode) “Gebt mir meinen Jesum wieder!” with bass soloist Enrico Lagasca in fine form, with zero smudging to his melismas; Legasca shines again towards the end in his aria, “Mache dich, mein Herze, rein”.

This version “compacts” recitatives, eliding them. The non-availability of then-archaic instruments such as the viola da gamba helped Mendelssohn’s trimming of the Bachian hedge, while some of the scoring does sound distinctly Mendelssohnian. Worth pointing out, though, that Mendelssohn is nowhere hear as interventionist as Mozart was with Handel/Händel’s *Messiah*/*Messias*.

The fine fortepiano is played by an equally fine player: Charles Mattax Moersch plays on an 1815 Nannette Streicher instrument (a copy borrowed from Rutgers). The Bach Choir of Bethlehem is of stunning quality throughout, tireless in their shading of chorales and dramatic interjections, not to mention a truly frightening cry of “Barabbas”. Founded in 1898 (!), this choir is therefore celebrating its 125th anniversary, The Bach Choir of Bethlehem gave the first American complete performance of Bach’s Mass in B-Minor in 1900, and that of the *Weihnachts-Oratorium* in 1901. The choral singers throw their all at the second part, and the result is certainly involving, if very occasionally a touch raw.

Each part fits neatly onto one compact disc each. As a World Premiere recording of this edition, this release obviously is of great import. That it is so musically satisfying seems entirely apt. In a sign of the times, the sung text and English translation is accessible via QR code printed on the inside back cover of the accompanying booklet which points one to an online *Dropbox* folder. The recoding is fine indeed, not least in capturing the appealing tone of the fortepiano.

Bach purists might hesitate, and the cozy Mendelssohnian glow of some of the scoring might well irritate some. But for the more liberal-minded, those who hear this for what it is, not just an act of homage but an active act of renovation intended to revivify (or is that resurrect?) Bach’s music by a similarly great composer, they will be enriched beyond measure. The effect of the final chorus is surely as great as in any performance of Bach-*seul*.

There are of course previous recordings of the Bach/Mendelssohn *St* *Matthew*, but crucially none of them used this edition. The live version on Challenge Classics was cordially recommended in a review in *Fanfare* 39:1, and there was a previous version on Opus 111 not submitted for review. This new recording supplants them by the very act of scholarship: the publication of the edition and these performances were always meant to coincide. Even more crucially, this Analekta release represents a visceral emotional experience in which everyone, soloists, choir and orchestra, are united as one in their vision. Is it really possible to ask for much more?. **Colin Clarke**

Five stars: **A** visceral emotional experience in which everyone, soloists, choir and orchestra, are united as one