

Anne Sofie von Otter – Bach (2009)

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01. *Widerstehe doch der Sünde* 02. *Aria Schläfert aller Sorgen Kummer* 03. 5. *Aria-Duet Wenn des Kreuzes Bitterkeiten* 04. No.47 *Aria (Alto) Erbarme dich, mein Gott* 05. 5. *Aria Kommt, ihr angefocht'nen Sünder* 06. 1. *Sinfonia* 07. 7. *Aria Nichts kann mich erretten* 08. *Sinfonia* 09. *Agnus Dei* [play](#) 10. *Aria (Duet) Et misericordia* 11. 1. *Duett O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort Herr, ich warte* [play](#) 12. 1. *Sei Lob und Ehr dem höchsten Gut*
Anne Sofie von Otter (Mezzo Soprano) Karin Roman (Soprano) Anders J. Dahlin (Countertenor) Jakob Bloch Jesperen (Bass) Tomas Medici (Tenor) Concerto Copenhagen Lars Ulrik Mortensen - conductor

Anne Sofie von Otter grew up singing Bach in a choir and began her illustrious solo career with the St. John Passion. “This disc,” she says, “is like coming back full circle.” I wouldn’t put it quite that way. Surely, von Otter has too many vistas to explore, too many worlds yet to conquer before the circle can be closed. But she is revisiting her roots, and doing so in a characteristically imaginative way. Rather than recording three of the four alto cantatas, she has assembled a collection of 12 numbers from the cantatas, the St. Matthew Passion, the B-Minor Mass, and the Magnificat. Only six (from BWV 54, 197, 30, 74, the Passion, and the Mass) are solo arias; three (from BWV 197, BWV 60, and the Magnificat), are duets, and one (from BWV 117) is a chorus—sung here by four soloists. Furthermore, there are two instrumental sinfonias (from BWV 35 and 12). Thus, in an unusual demonstration of generosity, von Otter commands the spotlight in only half of the numbers on the disc. In any event, von Otter sings with her accustomed intelligence and conviction. The voice can be a tad thin, especially in the lowest register, but von Otter’s innate musicality more than compensates for that. Her choice of conductor Mortensen and his band was an excellent one; Concerto Copenhagen is yet another outstanding period-instruments ensemble. Overall, this is a rewarding disc, but one that falls a little short of essential. ---arkivmusic.com

It was with Bach that Anne Sofie von Otter made her very first solo appearances when she performed the alto arias in the St. John Passion in Stockholm. But by then, as she has explained, the experience gained as a chorister in the Stockholm Bach Choir had already had a fundamental and enduring influence on her approach to the composer. "The conductor of the Bach Choir at that time was very dynamic: he was on fire for this music, and I became on fire for it as well. Then Nikolaus Harnoncourt came up to conduct the Bach motets, and that was also a marvellous experience. Harnoncourt was revolutionizing the performance of Baroque and Viennese Classical works - spring-cleaning tempos and phrasing and using original instruments to shed the old woolly sounds of a Romantic orchestra and make the music vibrant again. It was an exciting time for young people like me who gathered around the gramophone and listened eagerly to his new recordings of Monteverdi, Bach and Mozart. Harnoncourt really was my main influence in Bach."

"In the first ten years of my career I sang a lot of Bach," the singer adds, "but after that I purposely put his music and oratorio aside, because there was so much else to explore, especially opera. So this disc is like coming back full circle." Her concept for the recording and the repertoire she has chosen for it date back to the autumn of 2007. "I borrowed discs of every single Bach cantata, listened to them all, and made notes. It was wonderful to discover new arias, but rather than have a solo vocal recital I decided to break it up with purely instrumental movements. I'd known Lars Ulrik Mortensen for a long time, though we hadn't seen a lot of each other recently, and suddenly this name 'Concerto Copenhagen' appeared on the horizon; I heard them on the radio, and I thought: 'What a wonderful ensemble!' Sure enough, Lars Ulrik was the leader of this great ensemble, so when the idea of the Bach recording came up I thought: 'Why don't I ask Concerto Copenhagen?' I cut down the original list, Lars Ulrik added new ideas, and we had a fantastic time making this recording." As for instrumentation: "Bach often puts the alto voice together with the oboe, so that choice was given, and the sound of the Baroque oboe is one I love."

There is a strong showing in the programme of works from the latter part of the young Bach's years in Weimar, from 1714, when he composed *Widerstehe doch der Sünde* BWV 54, for alto, strings and continuo, and the more elaborately scored *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* BWV 12, with its plangent *Sinfonia*. After his subsequent spell at the court of the music-loving prince of Anhalt-Cöthen, where most of his secular orchestral works were written, Bach returned to composing cantatas when he was appointed Kantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig in 1723. At the end of May he began the production of what would, in a relatively short time, turn out to be a staggering quantity of work for the Lutheran liturgical year - some 300 sacred cantatas for Leipzig in five annual cycles, not to mention the great Passions and oratorios. For Christmas that year he wrote the first version of his Magnificat, originally in E flat major and with four insertions specific to Christmas Day; the pastoral siciliano of the lilting alto and tenor duet "Et misericordia", with its two flutes, is heard here in the more familiar D major version, made

toward the end of the decade.

The two sacred works that tower over that period, however, are the St Matthew Passion and the B minor Mass, both represented here. From the St Matthew Passion, first performed on Good Friday 1729, Anne Sofie von Otter sings the profoundly moving aria "Erbarme dich", which occurs at the point in the Easter narrative when Peter has fulfilled Christ's prediction that he will deny him three times before the cock crows, and follows the words "And he went out, and wept bitterly." The B minor Mass was initiated in 1733 with the Kyrie and Gloria and expanded with music composed both previously and later before reaching its final form at the end of the 1740s. The great alto aria "Agnus Dei" was written in 1735.

Historical considerations aside, for von Otter the music remains the starting point, and then the way it relates to the text. Bach poses specific problems for any singer: "Bach is tricky as far as breathing is concerned. There are these wonderful lines, and you want not to breathe so as not to break them up. But more and more the text has increased in meaning for me. Bach really does something with the words, and I enjoy using the text, getting it across. It's not by chance that Bach will really squeeze everything he can out of certain vowels or consonants - this symbolism is something I learned about in the Bach Choir. One has to paint the picture in Bach's mind with one's voice. `Erbarme dich', for instance, has great sadness, in the pleading of the minor sixths, while in `Widerstehe doch der Sünde' we decided on a particular approach to convey the image of the poison in the text."

"I dived into this project with great excitement. Lars Ulrik really has what I always like in a conductor, particularly in a Baroque conductor: very clear ideas and a lot of energy. He leads from the organ, so he's part of the music-making himself in a very active way. It was a creative collaboration, and the time was spent with great love." ---Kenneth Chalmers.

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