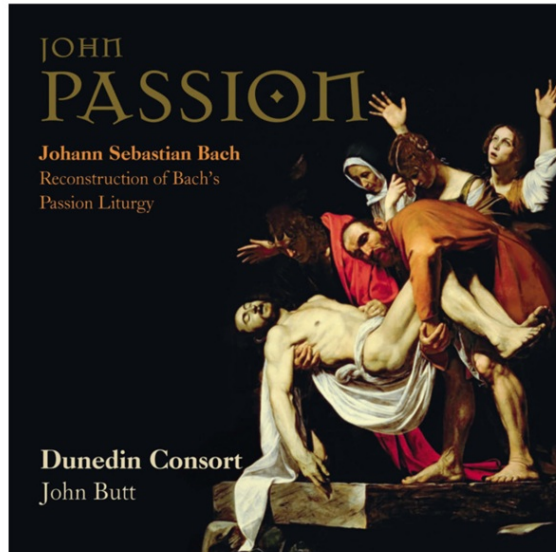




# March



*'Naturalness and emotional honesty are what emerge from this tight-knit and perfectly paced ensemble Passion'*

## Lindsay Kemp is enthralled by a contextualised St John Passion

### JS Bach

**JS Bach** *St John Passion*, BWV245.

*interspersed with* *Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund*, BWV621. *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*, BWV618. *Christus, der uns selig macht*, BWV620. *Nun danket alle Gott*, BWV657 *Buxtehude* *Praeludium*, BuxWV146 *Handl* *Ecce quomodo moritur*  
**Matthew Brook** *bar* *Christus* **Nicholas Mulroy** *ten*  
*Evangelist* **Joanne Lunn** *sop* **Clare Wilkinson** *contr*  
**Robert Davies** *bar* **University of Glasgow Chapel Choir**  
**James Grossmith**; **Dunedin Consort** / **John Butt**  
 Linn ® © CKD419 (139' • DDD/DSD)

Bach's *St John Passion* gains more from the small-ensemble approach, I think, than its big sister, the *St Matthew*. Its emotional intimacy and urgency are better suited to the agility and immediacy a one-to-a-part performance brings, and the result can be a deeply compelling human drama. We have had several decent 'chamber' *St Johns* in recent years – including recordings from the Ricercar Consort (7/11), Cantus Cölln and Portland Baroque (both 3/12) – but this new one from John Butt and the Dunedin Consort really struck home for me by achieving its vital results without extravagant overstatement, overt 'holiness' or self-conscious marking-out of the work's architecture. Indeed, naturalness and emotional honesty are what emerge from this tight-knit

and perfectly paced ensemble *Passion*, in which Bach's complex succession of recitatives, arias, choruses and chorales has surely seldom sounded so convincingly of a piece.

This is not, by the way, a polite way of saying that the performance lacks expressive variety or that performing standards are modest. On the contrary, the increasingly impressive Nicholas Mulroy's alert, lightly coloured Evangelist strikes a balance in which declamation and lyricism are equally ardent and equally touching, while Matthew Brook is a supple and authoritative Christus. The use of harpsichord and organ together in the recitatives gives their joint story-telling a reassuringly grounded quality; there is nothing 'ethereal' in this *St John* and it is better for it. Both singers also perform with great effectiveness in the arias, where they are joined by Joanne Lunn (her 'Ich folge dir gleichfalls' is a joyous and sure-footed gem) and Clare Wilkinson, whose distinctive alto, straightforward in expression and tellingly connected to her speaking voice, lends fragility to 'Von den Stricken'. Her desolate, almost whispered 'Die Trauernacht' in 'Es ist vollbracht!' also stabs to the heart.

When these four sing together in the choruses, to be joined by four more 'ripieno' singers, their sound is pressing and urgent

but never hectoring, so that whether representing a crowd baying for blood or a group of chastened or horror-struck sinners, they come across as a gathering of real people rather than a disembodied chorus. The fact that you can sometimes recognise a soloist's voice within the mix only adds to this impression of reality. Chorales are shaped with care and expressive sensitivity, but also never overcooked. The Dunedin Consort's reliance on relatively young casts such as this has always brought their performances an uplifting freshness and immediacy in their recordings of *Messiah*, the B minor Mass and of course the *St Matthew Passion*, but in this harrowing piece it allows the sense of drama and personal identification to reach a higher level.

There is, however, another unique layer to this *St John*, for the piece is set in the context of the Good Friday Vespers liturgy of Bach's Leipzig. This is where John Butt's scholarly curiosity pays off, for he clearly sees the liturgical setting not as a dilution but an intensification of the work's message. In this presentation the *Passion* – the service, not the oratorio – starts with an Easter chorale, first in Bach's organ setting (played by Butt) and then sung by a congregation (actually the University of Glasgow Chapel Choir)