

Kata Markon

Several years ago, I gave a five-part talk at Shepherd of the Valley on Johann Sebastian Bach's "St. Matthew Passion." Bach's St. Matthew Passion continued the Lenten tradition dating back to the middle ages of setting to music the words of the "passion" chapters of the gospel. For the Gospel of Matthew, this would be chapters 26 and 27. In addition to setting to music literally thousands of words from the gospel, Bach had a colleague compose short poems reflecting on various passages. These poems would be set to music as arias, duets etc. for vocal soloists. Even the attending congregation would be involved as they would occasionally sing Bach's arrangements of German chorales (many of which are the source of Lutheran hymns).

Bach's St. Matthew Passion (as well as his St. John Passion) is as close as he ever got to writing an opera. Attendees at the 1727 Good Friday premier were scandalized by the overt drama exhibited in this musical work written for such a solemn occasion. As a composer of opera and music drama, I was, and continue to be, riveted by it.

About a year or so after my lecture series, SOV's senior pastor at the time, Bryan Woken and I were discussing ways to observe the upcoming liturgical year of Mark. I mentioned that I had been interested in composing a passion modeled after Bach's seminal work. SOV's assistant pastor at the time, Stacy Payne, informed us that her husband Todd had made his own translation of the Gospel of Mark as part of a seminary project. Todd also happened to be an English major and writer.

Things began falling into place. Council approved the project and Todd Payne provided me his translation of Mark. Additionally, Todd wrote reflective texts (much like the Bach passion), to be used for arias, choruses, and the like. We chose the title "Kata Markon" which is a phonetic spelling of the Greek, κατὰ Μάρκον, or, "according to Mark" in English.

While Kata Markon is very much influenced by the St. Matthew passion, I also explore sacred Jewish and Middle Eastern music. For example the work opens with *Sh'ma Yisrael*, one of the most important prayers in the Jewish tradition.

Now that we are once again in the liturgical year of Mark, it provides an opportunity to revisit Kata Markon. Below you will find a link to the YouTube recording of the SOV premiere from 2009. Additionally Jen Vaden Barth and Kjrste Hillig will be performing arias from Kata Markon during Lent. I hope the music can contribute to your reflections during this Lenten season.

~ Mark