

Concerts presented by the South African Early Music Trust

Friday, 7 April, 19:30
Welgelegen NG Kerk, Buitekring 6, Dalsig, Stellenbosch

Sunday, 9 April 16:00
Evangelical Lutheran Church, 98 Strand Street, Cape Town

Reinhard Keiser (1674-1739)

St. Mark's Passion

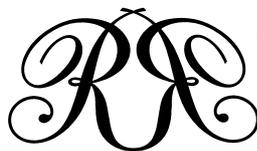
(1717)

Cape
Consort

Willem Bester – Evangelist
Charles Ainslie – Jesus

Elsabé Richter, Antoinette Blyth – soprano
Monika Voysey, Marcelle Steinmetz – alto
Willem Bester, Warren Vernon-Driscoll – tenor
Charles Ainslie, Reinhardt Liebenberg – bass

Paul van Zuilenburg, Jan-Hendrik Harley – Baroque violin
Emile de Roubaix, Lynn Rudolph – Baroque viola
Roland Johannes – organ
Hans Huyssen – Baroque cello & musical direction



We sincerely thank the councils and congregations of the Welgelegen Dutch Reformed church and the Evangelical Lutheran Strand Street Church for their kind support and for hosting our performances. We thank the Rupert Foundation for their on-going support and the SACM for the use of the Klop chest organ.

Programme Notes

Much speculation surrounds the life of the German Baroque composer Reinhard Keiser. Schooled at the famous Thomasschule in Leipzig, where he studied with Schelle and Kuhnau, he rose to fame as a highly prolific and extremely popular opera composer. After a short sojourn in Braunschweig he worked mainly in Hamburg and – together with Telemann and Händel – made a considerable contribution to the city's reputation as Germany's prime operatic centre during the early 18th century. It was only in 1728, after many failed attempts to attain a permanent tenure that, at the age of 54, he was finally appointed cantor of Hamburg's cathedral – as successor to his friend Johann Mattheson.

In stark contrast to his current obscurity, Keiser's contemporaries eulogized about his proficiency and inventiveness, the spontaneity and naturalness of his melodies, as well as the dramatic and rhetorical effect of his instrumentations. Mattheson enthused that in his music "one finds no constraints, no assiduity, everything flows, inspires... only pleasure is found there, no laborious toil". He was often asked to provide new (and more effective) recitatives for the current performances of contemporary operas – a general practice in music circles at that time. It is also known that on at least four occasions Händel 'borrowed' a certain passage from Keiser's *Octavia* for a number of his own works.

Keiser's style is highly eclectic, amalgamating a wide variety of influences. His vocal parts owe a lot to the Italian singing style. In addition, the French tradition may be detected not only in his ballet and choral scenes, but also in his refined and often very unusual instrumentations. Furthermore, German and local traditions also feature, including the occasional use of the vernacular Plattdeutsch. Apart from the typical mythological and historical libretti, several of his operas feature both local and current events. One such example is *Störtebeker* – an opera based on the story of the legendary pirate of the same name.

Keiser was primarily a composer of dramatic music, as his more than 100 operas prove. The *St. Mark's Passion* of 1717, therefore, occupies a unique position in his output: it is one of only very few and, in fact, the only surviving example of his sacred works. Even here the theatrical compositional approach is evident in the numerous instances of specific word painting and in the densely rhetorical musical idiom.

Some instrumental parts of the work have actually survived in copies from no lesser a hand than that of Johann Sebastian Bach, who performed the work on at least three different occasions. Apart from implying the highest recommendation conceivable for Keiser's work, an early performance in Leipzig was probably seminal for the conception of Bach's own oratorios. Many features that are well known to us from Bach's two monumental passions were prefigured in Keiser's work: His choruses already have the double function of congregational contemplation, as well as dramatic illustration of the hateful energy of the shouting mob. Also present for the first time are two distinct styles of recitative: secco ('dry' – that is, only supported by a bass line) for the Evangelist, but *accompagnato* for Jesus, thus accompanied by all strings effectively creating something like a musical halo – a device that Bach applied in his *St. Matthew's Passion* as well. Keiser's placement of the chorale *Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden* as an immediate reflection on Jesus' death and the following *Siciliano's* peacefully lilting effect, reinterpreting death as sleep, are other examples of many more parallel features.

Keiser's music has only recently begun to be revived through the performance of the few extant operas and of the *St. Mark's Passion*. Ironically new research has suggested that the author of this work might actually have been Nicolaus Brauns, an uncle of the more famous Nicolas Bruhns. Arguably, Bach might have caused the confusion by wrongly attributing his instrumental parts to Keiser. However, to date no conclusive proof of authorship has been found. Under the circumstances, Keiser's authorship is just as probable, especially given his esteem amongst his contemporaries. To quote Telemann: "We honour your talent, son of nature, who, even though you did not seek Art's science and secrets, you were nevertheless the greatest visionary of your epoch."

Regardless of the unresolved authorship the work speaks for itself. In its humble, yet poetic conciseness it achieves a sublimely expressive quality that manifests as a compelling fusion of musical and religious devotion.

Hans Huyssen