

## *Bach St. John Passion* Early Music Review

Recording Reviews | Brian Clark | June 2008

Bach St John Passion (1725 version)

Derek Chester, Evangelist

Douglas Williams, Jesus

Abigail Haynes, Melissa Hughes, Ian L Howell,

Sylvia Aiko Rider, Steven Caldicott Wilson, Joshua Copeland

Ilya Poletaev, org, William Perdue, vlc, Cameron Arens, db

Yale Collegium Players, Robert Mealy, dir,

Yale Schola Cantorum, Simon Carrington, conductor

116' 10" (2 CDs)

Rezound RZCD-5017-18 (available at [www.gothic-catalog.org](http://www.gothic-catalog.org))

The 1725 version of Bach's St John Passion has not often been recorded. The most obvious differences between this and the original (performed in Leipzig one year earlier) are the outer movements – the final chorale from 1724 is replaced by a setting of the German version of the Agnus Dei, while instead of the opening chorus 'Herr unser Herrscher', Bach uses the movement which would eventually close the first part of his St Matthew Passion. As Markus Rathey's informative notes state, this changes the liturgical emphasis of the entire work; instead of glorifying God, the Passion now highlights human sin and the necessity and wonder of Christ's death for the redemption of mankind.

That this recording is the product of a largely student ensemble is, quite frankly, astonishing. Simon Carrington (who participated in the 40th birthday concert at the end of April of the group he co-founded, The King Singers) and Robert Mealy, one of the United States' leading baroque violinists, draw fantastic performances from their singers and players respectively. Without doubt, Derek Chester has a great career ahead of him as the Evangelist in any baroque passion – he tells the story while sustaining a glorious sound (an essential in this repertoire) – and Douglas Williams will surely follow suit as Christus. Indeed, the musical set-up at Yale is fast becoming a hotbed for the nurturing of talent in the field of sacred music, and – largely thanks to Simon and Robert (though not underplaying the raw talent the students bring with them), the Institute of Sacred Music is surely now one of the world's centres of excellence in 17th- and 18th-century choral performance practices.