

*Sunday, 23 March 2008*



Good Friday seems like the right day to attend St. John's Passion. I was invited to the rehearsal of J. S. Bach's Oratory at Westerkerk to sketch the musicians, choir and solo singers. The conductor was singing the parts of the tenor who had not arrived yet. Soon I was drawing to the flow of the music, inspired by the sounds and images around me. I lost my sense of time.

Later I noticed other spectators also attending the rehearsal. I saw an elderly lady wearing a fur coat and sitting in a wheelchair in the middle of the church. Two girls, probably her granddaughters, were fussing over her, covering her knees with a blanket, bringing her coffee. She was enjoying the music, quietly singing along now and then. During the break someone said, "That's Aafje." "Aafje?" "Aafje Heynis." I could not believe my ears. The famous singer of the 1950s and 1960s. I did not realize she was still alive. She had a unique voice, a warm pure alto. I never heard a more beautiful rendition of J. S. Bach's *Bist du bei mir*. I could now recognize her face clearly, which I knew so well from the CD covers. Though her hair was grey, her face with the pale blue eyes and strong cheekbones was still basically the same. From a distance I quickly made a sketch and showed it to her. I thanked her for her music. The two girls repeated my words to her, trying to reach her through the fog of her mind. Somehow I felt a deep respect for her.

At Westerkerk I am always aware of its history as Rembrandt's burial place and down the street from Anne Frank's house. Last year the church was renovated. When the renovation was completed and the tarpaulin removed, the gold of the tower appeared to have changed into blue. The architect based this change on historical evidence: in a certain period, this was the color. Who am I to deny history? But I regret that the golden crown was stolen from Amsterdam. With the blue top, the church looks like a fancy building at Disneyland. Tourists will like it. I made this water color a long time ago. It was on a chilly day in October that I was painting the cityscape with the tower and the golden autumn colors. These were the golden days of Westerkerk.