



Kile SMITH (b. 1956)

Vespers (2008) [65.00]

The Crossing/Donald Nally; Piffaro, The Renaissance Band

rec. 21-24 July 2008, High Point, St. Peter's Church in the Great Valley, Malvern, PA, USA

NAVONA RECORDS NV5809 [65.00]

Piffaro, The Renaissance Band was founded in 1980. Its intention was to recreate the sounds of both the professional wind bands of the late Medieval and Renaissance periods as well as those of more rustic peasant music. Directors Joan Kimbell and Robert Wiemken conceived the idea of translating a Renaissance liturgical work for chorus and wind into 21st century practice. Having previously produced liturgical reconstructions in both the Roman and Reformed traditions, it was decided to use a Vespers service in the Reformed tradition. This meant that the service would include Latin canticles, but also German hymns and would be able to use a variety of chorales as the musical foundation. The Philadelphia-based composer Kile Smith was chosen as the composer, partly because Smith himself grew up in the Lutheran tradition and was familiar with its musical traditions.

The result is 65 minutes of contemporary music performed by The Crossing (under conductor Donald Nally), a choir founded in 2005 to specialise in contemporary choral music, and Piffaro, mixing modern and old traditions. Smith was able to take advantage of the fact that, like most other period wind groups, the performers in Piffaro are proficient on a variety of instruments, as were their Renaissance counterparts. This means that Smith had a total of eight different instruments available, spread across seven players. Smith uses the choir in a similar manner, extracting soloists from amongst the singers and mixing and matching the eight parts (SSAATTBB) in various ways, usually variants on full choir or lower voices.

The thirteen movements of the Vespers consist of a sequence of Latin canticles and psalms, interspersed with Hymns in German and purely instrumental Sonatas. But the influence of the Lutheran chorale is strong and these form the structure of the instrumental movements as well. The full list of movements is as follows:-

Veni Sancte Spiritus
Hymn: Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern
Introit: Psalm 70
Sonata a 5: Steht auf, ihr lieben Kinderlein
Psalm 27
Sonata a 5: In dir ist Freude
Psalm 113
Sonata a 7: O süßer Herr, Jesu Christ
Hymn: Her Christ, der einig Gottes Sohn
Magnificat
Vater Unser
Triple Canon: Nun danket all und bringet Ehr
Deo Gratias

Smith's style is essentially tonal and he uses both plainchant and Lutheran chorales in his settings. He makes full use of the wide variety of instruments available to him and each movement seems to be orchestrated in a slightly different manner. The result is not a strict liturgical event, as Smith has pared or elaborated the source texts according to his needs. With the plainchant, sometimes Smith presents it plain and at other times it simply threads its way through the piece. In the choral movements, the instruments usually provide a commentary around the chorus.

Inevitably, writing for such instruments as recorders, Smith often produces music that is consonant, though often striking and modally inflected. That said, there are moments of edginess and chromaticism. The results are thoughtful. Though based on medieval and renaissance sources and ideas, the result is totally modern, without ever being simplistic.

Though the various movements are written for different varieties of forces, using two different languages and mixing plainchant and Lutheran chorales, Smith creates a coherent and well-balanced final structure.

I have nothing but praise for the performers. The Crossing sing the music as if they have been doing it all their life - there is nothing contrived or awkward about their presentation. And their twenty members make a beautifully blended sound, which matches the wind players well. Piffaro play Smith's music as if it was the most natural thing in the world, which is a testament to their technique and to Smith's ability to craft new music for old instruments.

This is one of those pieces that deserves to have a wider life, but given the forces required is likely to be beyond the means of many groups.

The CD booklet includes an article by the artistic directors of Piffaro along with one by the composer. Full texts are provided, including texts for those instrumental numbers based on Chorales. Also, if you put the CD into your computer you get access to PDFs of all the music on this disc, which makes it a stunning resource for all those interested.

There's some very fine singing and playing here. But the main interest lies in its fascinating blend of ancient and modern. Piffaro and Kile Smith have created a brilliant new work in the spirit of the Lutheran Vespers service which remains accessible without ever talking down.

Robert Hugill