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Byrd: *Mass for Four Voices, Mass for Five Voices, Infelix ego*, Oxford Camerata, Jeremy Sumerly, conductor. NAXOS 8.550574, produced by Murray Khouri

Purcell: *The Fairy Queen*, The Scholars Baroque Ensemble. NAXOS 8.5506601, produced by Murray Khouri

Handel: *Messiah*, The Scholars Baroque Ensemble. NAXOS 8.550667-68, produced by Murray Khouri

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RECORD REVIEWS/ COMPTES RENDUS DE DISQUES

Palestrina: *Missa Pape Marcelli, Missa Aeterna Christi Munera*, Oxford Camerata, Jeremy Sumerly, conductor. NAXOS 8.550573, produced by Murray Khouri.

Byrd: *Mass for Four Voices, Mass for Five Voices, Infelix ego*, Oxford Camerata, Jeremy Sumerly, conductor. NAXOS 8.550574, produced by Murray Khouri.

Purcell: *The Fairy Queen*, The Scholars Baroque Ensemble. NAXOS 8.550660-1, produced by Murray Khouri.

Handel: *Messiah*, The Scholars Baroque Ensemble. NAXOS 8.550667-8, produced by Murray Khouri.

Great Britain has produced many performing groups specializing in early music during the past quarter century. Two groups, both formed in the past decade, have come to recent international attention through their recordings on the budget label, Naxos. Both groups make use of reduced forces and are attuned to scholarly performance practices. Given the competition, however, from better-known groups in the same repertoire, both in Britain and elsewhere, what purpose do these recordings serve? Can they stand comparison with those of the more famous ensembles and, if so, do they present a distinctive approach to the repertoire or merely duplicate material found elsewhere, but at a cheaper price?

Jeremy Summerly was a choral scholar at New College, Oxford, where he graduated in 1982. Following seven years with the BBC Radio, he joined the Royal Academy of Music as a lecturer. In 1990, he was appointed conductor of the Schola Cantorum of Oxford, a choir of medium size with which he has recorded the music of Fauré, Vierne and De Séverac. The Oxford Camerata was formed by Summerly to meet the growing demand for performances of Renaissance vocal music. Since then, the choir has expanded its repertoire to include medieval and twentieth-century music. Since 1991, Summerly has made several recordings of Renaissance *a capella* music with this group for Naxos, and others are promised for future release.¹

¹ Recordings already released include works by Gesualdo (Naxos 8.550742), Victoria and Lobo (Naxos 8.550575), Lassus (Naxos 8.550842), Tallis (Naxos 8.550576), and White, Tallis, Palestrina, Lassus and de Brito (Naxos 8.550572). Another recording with works by Palestrina and Lassus (Naxos 8.550836) is performed by the Schola Cantorum, Oxford.

Summerly's choir is drawn from the large pool of available young singers in Britain. While the accompanying notes to the recordings under review refer to the size of the choir being varied to meet the needs of each composer, a chorus of twelve singers has been used consistently in the recordings released to date. What appears to change is the membership of the chorus itself. Indeed, the recording of works by Byrd was made only three months after that of the Palestrina Masses, yet almost half the choir is different.² Such an approach can be a double-edged sword; the gains in being able to choose individual voices to meet the needs of different music can be offset by the lack of stability in a group whose constituency is constantly changing. Unlike some of the more famous performing groups at either end of the Oxbridge axis, Summerly makes use of adult female voices. This choice brings the Oxford Camerata into direct comparison with a more famous British ensemble of similar size and constituency, the Tallis Scholars under Peter Philips.

Summerly's recordings of the two Palestrina Masses were made in September of 1991 at Dorchester Abbey. His approach is rhythmically vigorous, and is strongly contrasted on many levels to the more restrained recording made of the *Missa Pape Marcelli* by Georg Ratzinger and the Regensburger Domspatzen.³ Summerly's range of dynamics is wide, and he avoids the detached and serene sounds that one often hears in this repertoire. Such differences are all-the-more apparent given the choice of the recording producer to place the microphones very closely to the singers. While this does help to clarify the textures, it also results in a rather aggressive sound picture at times. The balance within the choir is not always ideal, in part the result of the sopranos not being well served by the microphone placement. Pitch, however, is good. For the most part, Summerly's choice of tempi are conventional; however, the *Agnus Dei* movement of the *Missa Papae Marcelli* is performed slowly. Indeed, Summerly's performance is more than three times longer than in the Ratzinger performance. Summerly pairs this famous Mass setting with a late work of Palestrina, the *Missa Aeterna Christi Munera*, published in 1590. The conductor's direct approach works well with this conservative musical setting.

Similar comments can be made about Summerly's recording of the two Byrd Masses. Here, the blend of the choir is more successful, and the acoustic of the Chapel of Hertford College, Oxford, more helpful. The recorded perspective is still rather close, but the results are less aggressive than in the recording of the Palestrina Masses. Once again, Summerly's approach is vigorous, and the similarity to Philips's performances of the Masses with the Tallis Scholars is

2 Such changes in the membership of the chorus are also found in other recordings of the series.

3 EMI Deutsche Harmonia Mundi CDC 7475282.

readily apparent.⁴ While the addition of *Infelix ego*, a choral work based on a text written by Savonarola on the eve of his execution, is a substantial bonus on Summerly's recording, other recordings, such as that by Philips, have been able to give all three of Byrd's Masses on the same CD, albeit with faster tempi than those chosen by Summerly. In both recordings under present review, Edward Wickham's accompanying notes are brief, saying little about the music that has been recorded. The practice is rare for this label and all-the-more unfortunate, given the fact that the recordings are likely to attract many first-time buyers.

The Scholars Baroque Ensemble was created in 1987 by David van Asch to complement the work of The Scholars, a vocal quartet which has been in existence for over twenty years. While van Asch serves as the Artistic Director of the ensemble (in addition to being the bass singer in the quartet), the ensemble works without a conductor, and the singers and players work as a collective to produce their own performing editions of the music. All vocal soloists are drawn from the ranks of the chorus, with the members of the original vocal quartet serving as section leaders and principal soloists. Original instruments or copies thereof are used in the recordings. Once again, the group is of flexible size, varying to meet the demands of the chosen repertoire. Comparison of the lists of performers supplied with the recordings reveals that the membership of the chorus remains more consistent than that of the instrumental ensemble. In particular, a largely different group of violinists appears on each recording.

Both of the recordings by the Scholars Baroque Ensemble succeed in presenting new and intriguing versions of the works in question. The recording of *The Fairy Queen* differs from the recorded competition in that it separates Purcell's music completely from any reference to the adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that it was meant to accompany. In the process, all instrumental music not related to the five self-contained masques is placed in an appendix on the second CD. A small orchestra of twenty-one players is used for the recording, although this tally includes several instruments that are used infrequently in the performance. This group is smaller than that found in either of the John Elliot Gardiner or the William Christie versions, and presents a radically different vision of the work from that found in the performance recorded by Benjamin Britten and the English Chamber Orchestra.⁵ While the scale of the performance on Naxos is intimate, the performance is spirited and, once past some uncomfortable moments in the first masque, the ensemble is crisp and the vocal contributions are well attuned to the demands of Purcell's music.

4 Gimmell CDCGIM 345

5 Deutsche Grammophon 419 221-2, Harmonia Mundi 401308/9 and Decca/London 433 163-2, respectively.

The singers acquit themselves with distinction, both as soloists and as a chorus, where they blend their voices with care.

That this approach to semi-opera should work well in a recording is perhaps no great surprise. But can such an intimate, chamber-music approach work as well in an oratorio of a later period? Van Asch and his performing forces argue that it can. The version of *Messiah* recorded is that of the original Dublin performance of 13 April 1742. As a result, the orchestra consists solely of strings, two trumpets and timpani. Handel appears to have used only a small choir in Dublin, and the present recording makes use of fourteen singers, of which eight double as vocal soloists. This is a radical approach, even when compared with the most rigorous of the “authentic” recordings of this work. Trevor Pinnock makes use of thirty-two choristers on his recording, while Harry Christophers felt it necessary to enlarge his choir, The Sixteen, by three for his recording.⁶ Yet such is the balance between the well-blended chorus and orchestra on the Naxos recording that even such dramatic moments as the “Hallelujah” and “Amen” choruses do not seem to lack in either power or intensity. Given that the group works without a conductor, the precision with which they attack phrases is admirable. Furthermore, what a joy it is to hear *every* word clearly in the choruses. Sibilants prove to be problematic in some choruses, a problem perhaps compounded by the lively acoustic of Rosslyn Hill Chapel in London, where the performance was recorded. Dynamic contrasts are well judged, and the entire performance demonstrates careful preparation.

Given the use of the original Dublin score of the work, there are several differences from the version that is often encountered in concert halls and on recordings. “But who may abide” is sung by the bass, and entirely in 3/8 metre. “Rejoice greatly” is given in 12/8 metre, and “How beautiful are the feet” is heard as a duet for two alto voices. These, as well as the other vocal solos, are sung with great conviction by the eight soloists. Although there is some apparent struggle to control vibrato in one or two instances, all of the soloists are equal to their respective tasks and are stylistically aware. Indeed, the lack of “star” singers and the greater intimacy of the performance has increased the dramatic presentation of the text, rather than detracting from it. While this is not a recording of *Messiah* for those searching for the inflated grandeur of Victorian-era performances, it presents a viable and refreshing view of the work that can be safely recommended to open-minded listeners.

To return to the questions that I posed at the beginning of this review, all of the recordings discussed above represent fair value for their nominal costs. Summerly’s work is certainly competent, and his series may bring to light more

6 Deutsche Grammophon 423 630-2 and Hyperion CDA 66251/2, respectively.

Renaissance vocal music that is otherwise unrecorded. Yet in works as familiar as those under present review, the results are neither as refined as the best of the recorded competition nor strikingly individual. It is this very individuality, however, that makes the work of The Scholars Baroque Ensemble so rewarding, and I look forward to their future recordings with anticipation.

Paul F. Rice