

Anniversaries & Messages
Various Composers
Yale Schola Cantorum
Simon Carrington, conductor
Delos DE 3436 (2011; 51:53)

In this delightful live recording by Simon Carrington and the Yale Schola Cantorum, the five movements of the *Victoria Missa Alma Redemptoris Mater* are the outer and inner cornerstones sumptuously supporting the other programmed works: Christopher Theofanidis' *Messages to Myself*, Bach's *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf*, Liszt's *Ave Maria* and David Lang's *again* (after Ecclesiastes). The 'messages' in the title seems to refer to the Theofanidis pieces, and perhaps the 'anniversaries' reference Victoria's death in 1611 – the concert being recorded in the spring of 2011.

In the *Vittoria*, there is seamless singing; phrases moving one voice to another in a thoughtful and expert fashion, passing the tone and intensity with suppleness and simplicity. The polyphony is delightfully rendered, but even more exquisite are the homophonic passages in the *Gloria*. The mass is set for two four-voice choirs, but when both choirs sing together the effect is well-balanced fullness and warmth rather than simply overpowering volume.

The Schola's tone is impeccable and well suited to Renaissance polyphony. There is a discernable color and texture to each section of the choir but on the inner edges of the sections - basses passing to tenors, tenors to altos, altos to sopranos - there is a delicious homogeneity.

Christopher Theofanidis, a graduate of Yale and currently on its faculty, has written numerous works for orchestra including for the London Symphony and the Philadelphia Orchestra. His choral output is minimal compared to his orchestral and chamber music offerings: two operas, a Grammy-nominated large scale work for orchestra, chorus and soloists titled *The Here And Now*, and the *Messages to Myself* featured on this cd.

The Schola Cantorum performs the four pieces of *Messages to Myself* with restrained beauty and exuberant musicality. Set to poetry by four different poets (Whitman, Rumi, Amy Beth Kirsten, and Yeats) the pieces are both harmonically dense and melodically challenging. Conjuring thoughts of Ligeti and Pärt, these pieces often have a texture reminiscent of Russian Orthodox homophony frequented by joyful outbursts of soul-wrenching beauty. Of his writing, *The Washington Post* said:

What impresses me about Theofanidis...is his ability to blend several musical languages once thought to be mutually exclusive...there are elements of Asian music, minimalism, high chromaticism, and a sort of brightly colored impressionism...the results are enormously attractive.

The Bach *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf* and the Liszt *Ave Maria* are both sung with freedom and care, clarity and musical precision. In this program, however, they are not the highlights, but rather the cleansing courses between the heavier portions of this musical feast.

Awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2008, David Lang (also a graduate of Yale) composed his *again* (after Ecclesiastes) for the Cerddorion Vocal Ensemble of New York. Lang's music has been described as haunting and complicated, resisting categorization. Beautifully and poignantly minimalistic *again* nods toward the late John Tavener and the Estonian composer Toivo Tulev. The few lines Lang uses from the Book of Ecclesiastes are designed to 'create a strange equilibrium of hope and futility'. Of this work Lang writes:

I wanted to make a piece that might convey the weariness of all of these endless cycles, concentrating on the weight of things repeating again. And again.

The Victoria, Bach and Liszt are certainly appropriate for good college ensembles and even excellent high school choruses. The Theofanidis and the Lang pieces are probably best suited for mature college level ensembles and professional organizations.