

Into Thy Hands: The Music of the Grosvenor Chapel
The Choir of the Grosvenor Chapel, London
Richard Hobson, Director
Joseph Sentance and Richard Hobson, organ
Regent REGCD351 (2010; 64:32)

When discussing choral singing in Britain certain institutions and organizations spring to mind: Tallis Scholars, Cambridge College Choir, Westminster Cathedral and St. Paul's – fully staffed choirs and large, impressive spaces. But the Choir of the Grosvenor Chapel numbers only five singers (SSATB) who are joined on this recording by four additional singers. And apparently, on any given Sunday, this consort of five with their director Richard Hobson, sing a fairly large array of music from almost every period in the intimate setting of Grosvenor Chapel. That is what is offered on this recording: a mix of Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical pieces accompanied by two commissioned works.

The first selection is the lovely *Missa Brevis in D major* (K194) of Mozart. The Grosvenor Chapel Choir has an excellent feel for the style and character of this piece and the acoustics of the Chapel seem a perfect setting. With two violins, cello, double bass and organ continuo, this would be a terrific way to introduce Mozart to a high school choir or small college ensemble. The solo work is very approachable, and at a length of approximately fifteen minutes, a director could perform the entire work or perhaps program only the Credo or the Agnus Dei (each around four minutes). This recording is, perhaps, a reminder that works from the Baroque and Classical period do not necessarily need large forces to be effective.

The next several unaccompanied selections are somewhat disappointing. *Loquebantur variis linguis* of Thomas Tallis is fine but does not show this group off at its best. In the Robert White *Ad te levavi oculos meos*, the sopranos are allowed to scoop on occasion, the alto uses a bit too much vibrato, the group does not sing exquisitely in tune (particularly in the higher phrases), and the cross relations were not handled with much grace. The Peter Phillips *Christus resurgens ex mortuis* used a much leaner sound and there seemed to be more care given to the balance between parts, their different vocal colors being far more harmonious. Perhaps these pieces are not the group's forte and certainly there are numerous other recordings of these pieces that are marvelous.

This group seems to excel in the accompanied pieces. There is some delightful solo work in the *Salvatur mundi* of John Blow, and part of what is missing in the Robert White, the choir corrects in the Purcell *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei*. It was enchanting and exciting, and the cross relations were executed with grace and spirit making the dissonance feel like part of the fabric. The Blow and the Purcell would lend themselves very well to a good high school choir with some strong solo voices. And they would make a solid addition to any program at the college level.

The centerpiece of this recording, though, has to be Georg Frederick Handel's *As pants the hart for cooling streams*, his first work in English. Best known in a revised version with orchestra (Handel revised the work three times), this version, edited by Donald Burrows in 1974, is unique in having an accompaniment for organ only, in keeping with the English verse anthem tradition begun in the seventeenth century. This recording presages what The Grosvenor Choir might do with Handel's *Messiah*: lean, clear lines, subtle and elegant phrasing, and powerful yet reserved declamation of text. Again, the solo work here is solid and continues to underline the strength of this ensemble.

In addition to the skilled singing of the accompanied pieces, it must be mentioned that the organists here, Mr. Sentance and Mr. Hobson, play with a great deal of subtlety allowing the singers to feel completely supported but never overwhelmed.

There are two commissioned works: Jonathan Dove's *Into Thy Hands* and the premiere recording of Francis Jackson's *Come, thou holy Paraclete*. The Jackson piece, written in honor of the dedication of the new organ at Grosvenor Chapel, is a likable piece but a bit long winded, more a piece about the organ than the choir. But the Jonathan Dove piece is reminiscent of Frank Ferko's works, particularly the *Hildegard Motets*, and is definitely a work to listen to several times to absorb all it has to offer.

Richard Hobson directed this ensemble with a light touch. He allows the singers to express themselves when they need to and, for the most part, reigns in their sound when it is appropriate. Perhaps, though, the group needs a little more governing. All of the singers of The Grosvenor Chapel Choir are very accomplished singers giving spirited and musical performances. But depending on the piece, their solo timbre does not always re-absorb back into the choral sound. Often, particularly in the unaccompanied pieces, the warmer and often more colorful alto sound cuts through the texture. And there are occasions when a tenor voice asserts itself a bit too heroically.

There are so many reasons to listen to this recording: the Handel, alone, is worth the time and expense. But the overall feeling of this recording is one of uplift, subtlety, and charm. It also provokes a question choir directors could well ask themselves: what other pieces that use larger forces might sound good with just nine singers?