

Heinrich Schütz: Opus ultimum (Schwanengesang)  
Harmonia Mundi  
Collegium Vocale Gent  
Philippe Herreweghe, director  
Concerto Palatino  
HMC901895 96  
(2007; cd1: 44'47", cd2: 44'02")

When asked about music from the Baroque, most choral conductors think of Bach and Handel. Indeed, the music theorist, Heinrich Schenker, once implied that the entire Medieval and Renaissance periods, as well as the first half of the Baroque period, were simply preparation for Bach. And it's true that what we call the 'mature Baroque' codified a hundred years of experimentation with tonality, texture and form. But we need only to listen to Giulio Caccini, Claudio Monteverdi, Henry Purcell, and Heinrich Schütz to hear the glories and experience the epiphanies of composers who understood their craft and left us with hundreds of beautifully constructed pieces from which to choose.

The early Baroque master, Heinrich Schütz, was born in the Renaissance, a hundred years before Bach, lived and worked in Germany, studied with Monteverdi (on two separate occasions) in Italy, and married the textural structures of both Gabrieli and Monteverdi with a new framework of harmonic ingenuity. The result is a sound that is unmistakably Schütz and that challenges and satisfies the singer, the conductor and the audience in equal measure.

The *Opus ultimum* or *Schwanengesang* (the 'final work' or 'swan song') of Schütz, composed toward the end of his life, was never intended to be published publicly (though a copy was printed for his patron, Johann Georg II) or performed. Rather than on a tombstone, Schütz wanted to leave his epitaph in music, the final culmination of his spiritual and musical life. Set to the extensive text of Psalm 119, Psalm 100 and a Deutsches Magnificat, the nearly 89 minutes of *Opus ultimum* (for two choirs SATB, cornet, two trombones, gambas, organ, lute and violone) are somber, joyous, transportive, and engaging. As his mature works go, these are not innovative but, like the music of Dufay or Brahms, are examples of perfect craftsmanship and proportion.

As far as history provides, there was never a performance of Schütz's final works, and the manuscripts were lost until 1900. At that point six of the eight part books resurfaced. In 1930 the continuo parts were discovered, but once again all the music was lost and presumed destroyed during the Second World War. In the 1970's, however, the six parts books and the continuo parts were rediscovered. It only remained to pen in the two missing parts (a soprano and a tenor) and the pieces could finally be performed for the first time 300 years after their creation.

The ensemble on this recording, Collegium Vocale Gent, is wonderful. These twenty-four singers, accompanied beautifully by eleven gifted instrumentalists, are under the very able direction of Philippe Herreweghe. He started Collegium Vocale Gent thirty-five years ago and together, they have nineteen recordings of works by Bach, and a dozen other recordings of the music of Lassus, Monteverdi, Palestrina, Purcell, Schein, and Schütz. The singing is luscious and full-bodied, or restrained but with a dynamic tensile strength...whatever the music requires.

Schütz's more complicated *a cappella* music (*So fahr ich hin* or *Die mit Tränen säen*, for example) requires more mature singers, but the good news here is that the accompaniment and the more pervasive homophonic settings of the texts makes these pieces accessible to fine high school choirs. And college choirs, particularly the early music ensembles would be thrilled to sing these gems. The timing of the eleven settings of the texts from Psalm 119 range from five to eight minutes, the Psalm 100 setting is a little over seven minutes, as is the Magnificat. There is no need, then, to perform all of them as a group, as each piece stands alone and complete.