

Requiem

Johannes Ockeghem: Missa pro defunctis

Bent Sørensen: Fragments of Requiem

Ars Nova Copenhagen

Paul Hillier, conductor

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The concept of adding music to the setting of the Mass is not new. Troping has been a practice since the Medieval period. Creating “companion” pieces that meld well together started with the first recitals of multiple composers works in the early Romantic period: a little Schubert, and little Beethoven, a piece of Bach. In the twentieth century programming companion works in between movement of a Mass setting often made for a unique sound experience: pieces of Ligeti between movements of a Josquin Mass; pairing movements of the Duruflé *Requiem* with those of William Byrd. When it works well, the juxtaposition of music from such divergent centuries can be both thrilling and mystical.

That is what Paul Hillier and the Ars Nova Copenhagen have achieved with the marvelous recording simply called *Requiem*. It inserts Danish composer Bent Sørensen’s *Fragments of Requiem* in between movements of Johannes Ockeghem’s *Missa pro defunctis*.

Sørensen, born in 1958, began his musical career as a folk musician before training at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen. His life-long search for the marriage of divergent styles and applications is emphasized in this recording. In the liner notes, Jens Brincker says that

The longing to create a totality out of new and old, of unknown and familiar, can already be detected in Bent Sørensen’s early works. It has been fulfilled in the early 2000s with works like Seven Longings and Requiem. And it still acts as a driving force in his search for new modes of expression.

Johannes Ockeghem (ca. 1410-1497) is one of the great masters of the Franco-Flemish style. His sacred works are far more sonorous and dark than his secular works, which was a stylistic shift from the music of Dufay and Dunstable. Like Bent Sørensen, Ockeghem felt that the music should always reflect the tone of the text. This is one of the reasons why this recording works so well: the beauty and stark clarity of Sørensen’s often complicated harmonies is reflected in the deep warmth and supple organization of Ockeghem’s melodies.

There is a third star here and that’s the marvelous Ars Nova Copenhagen. This ensemble, under the solid direction of Paul Hillier, manages to balance the sounds and textures of both composers’ music to the extent that whether they are singing Ockeghem or Sørensen isn’t always clear. Jens Brincker reports that “at the heart of Ars Nova Copenhagen’s work is its equal dedication to early music and new music,” and that is very apparent here.

And balance is the operative word in this recording: the chorus is absolutely balanced section to section; their treatment of the text is extremely even and lovingly toned; and their high level of musicianship is never on display, but rather is subservient to the composers needs.

Excellent high school choruses could sing any of Ockeghem’s music with conductors who understand the intricacies of polyphony and the importance of not overpowering the vocal line. The Sørensen works are as dense in their polyphony, but the harmonic language is much more challenging, as are the demands on the vocal range.