

Toivo Tulev: Songs
Robin Blaze, countertenor
Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir
Tallinn Chamber Orchestra
Paul Hillier, Director
HMU 807452
(2008; 63':45")

Paul Hillier has done some amazing work during his career, working with his own group (The Hilliard Ensemble), guest conducting other groups on recordings, and sometimes in combination. This reviewer had the pleasure to hear a performance of Arvo Pärt's *Passio* at Symphony Hall in Chicago with Paul Hillier conducting, member of The Hilliard Ensemble as soloists and His Majesties Clerkes (now Bella Voce) as the chorus. Observing Hillier as he brought out the tenderness and austerity of Pärt's music while combining it with an ardent passion when necessary was to watch a true master at work.

His association, then, with The Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir (he is now their permanent director) and one of the second wave of contemporary Estonian composers, Toivo Tulev, completes a circle that was begun nearly twenty years ago. Hillier's clear understanding and deep affinity for the music of the Medieval period made him uniquely qualified to champion the music of Arvo Pärt. And the parallels between Pärt's and Tulev's music are numerous. Perhaps more overtly dramatic than Pärt's music, Tulev roots his sonority in overtones, stacking third on third, fourth on fourth to create colors that unfold in unique and subtle ways.

Sung segue one to the next, the first eight pieces comprise the *Cantique des cantiques* (Song of Songs) for chorus, soloists, and chamber orchestra. The instrumental ensemble (here members of the Tallinn Chamber Orchestra) is an eclectic orchestral palette, part Britten, part Stravinsky, and part Penderecki: piccolo, flute, flauto dolce, alto flute, duduk (a Eurasian wind instrument) oboe, English horn, bassoon, contrabassoon, synthesizer, organ, organo lantano, percussion, and strings. *Note: these perimeters could limit performance by many choirs.*

The Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, consisting of seven sopranos (adding two sopranos for some cuts), six altos, six tenors, and seven basses, sings with a marvelous and exhilarating intonation and intensity. The tone of the group is breathtaking, and stretched to its utter limits being required (often at once) to sing in the extreme vocal ranges with both subtlety and passion. And some of the solo work here is nothing short of astounding.

The last five pieces on the cd use texts by Thomas Traherne and Kornelius Becker, and texts from the works of Josquin Desprez and Thomas Morley. The pieces vary in style and treatment, using a combination of solo and choral singing with and without accompaniment. The effect is an austere charm, illuminating the words in the same way Morten Lauridsen's *Fire Madrigals* illuminated the texts of Renaissance poets.

None of these works is for the faint of heart: the music itself is complex harmonically; the musicianship needed to perform these works is intense; and (as was mentioned before) the instrumentation might limit some choral ensembles for performing these works with ease.

These pieces seem best suited to fine professional ensembles or the truly excellent college ensemble. As a listening tool this music is profound, full of delightful color and nuance, compositional flair and skill with a choir and soloists who sing with immense integrity and clarity. This cd should be on your shelf.