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Renaissance miscellany

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with which Biber is often associated, her Passacaglia shows a cunning side to her soloistic temperament: a flexible tempo allows both sound and music to breathe at their own pace. This gives the performance an immediate, extemporized feel, and the resulting liveliness is just as compelling as any virtuosity.

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A matter of weeks after the release of the first ever CD devoted to Johannes Prioris (from *Capilla Flamenca* on Eufoda (CD 1349, *rec* 2002–3), reviewed by John Milsom in *EM*, xxxii/1 (Feb 2004), pp.159–65, along comes **Johannes Prioris: Requiem, Missa super ‘Allez regretz’** (Accent, ACC 23155, *rec* 2003) from Ensemble Dedalus, directed by Roberto Festa. *Capilla Flamenca* had also recorded the Requiem, interspersing it with other works chosen round the theme of ‘life and death’ (Eufoda 1349). This allowed for the presentation of some of the composer’s rather fine secular music, but the opportunity to hear another Mass on the new recording makes the two recordings complementary rather than rivals. I suspect that many will therefore be interested to own both, even though the performances by Ensemble Dedalus do not quite measure up to those of the Flemish ensemble. In matters of tone and finish *Capilla Flamenca* has the edge in the Requiem, where its unanimity of timbre from top to bottom makes for a more satisfying sound image. Theirs is also the more secure intonation, although Dedalus are pretty consistent themselves. But it is in the pacing, phrasing and flow that the difference between the two ensembles is the most marked. Whether it is due to the *Capilla Flamenca*’s greater familiarity with the Franco-Flemish repertory (witness its recent recordings) or simply a matter of preparation, its performance of the Requiem feels the more considered of the two, and the more tellingly presented. In the Mass (on Hayne van Ghizeghem’s song), Dedalus make some puzzling interpretative decisions, such as the alteration of plainchant invocations in the Kyrie alongside with the polyphony, but in a different mode from it. To be sure, the quality of the music outweighs these reservations, even though one feels that singers of this calibre could certainly have produced something even better than the accomplished readings here. (For what it is worth, the pre-

sentation of the Eufoda CD, and the notes for it, are also the more careful and polished.)

The same applies, perhaps, to the recording from Dominique Vellard’s Ensemble Cantus Figuratus, **Pedro de Escobar: Missa in Granada** (Christophorus, CHR 77263, *rec* 2000). This is a liturgical reconstruction that draws on Escobar’s four-voice Mass (his only extant complete setting of the Ordinary) and Propers from an early 16th-century printed chant source, with three motets by Peñalosa to round off the programme. The vocal ensemble is joined by Les Haulz et les Bas, in accordance with the acknowledged role that instrumental ensembles held in church polyphony during the period. The main peculiarity of this practice concerns the use of the shawm on top lines in preference to the cornetto. As Ian Harrison writes in his notes on this topic, in order ‘to cultivate the Spanish taste for the brighter tone of the shawm, shawm players and singers evidently found ways of blending which their more northerly counterparts had not managed.’ Ironically, the blend between singers and instrumentalists is not always ideal in this performance, especially when the increasingly thin tone of the shawm in its upper reaches is overwhelmed by that of female sopranos near the top of their own range. From this standpoint, more satisfying performances of this repertory are readily available, using similar forces (albeit with male sopranos, and that may be the difference); one thinks in particular of the Gabrieli Consort and the Orchestra of the Renaissance. At the same time (and as with the Ensemble Dedalus’s recording just discussed), the repertorial interest overrides the technical questions one might entertain. Whether Escobar’s Mass quite sustains that interest is an open question, however. The simplicity of his polyphony lends itself well, say, to the constraints of the Requiem genre (as those who know Vellard’s recording of Escobar’s setting with the Ensemble Gilles Binchois of the Mass for the Dead will doubtless remember; see Virgin Classics, 5 45328-2, *rec* 1997); but his setting of the Ordinary is less compelling, to my ear at least. Still, Vellard’s championship of Escobar is worth applauding. Possibly we may hope for a recording devoted to the composer’s *villancicos*. Meanwhile, his rendering of some of the plainchant sections is very affecting, and it is not intended as faint praise for the disc as a whole to say that it brought me more pleasure than anything else; but I’m sorry if it does.

The two recordings considered thus far include a majority of ‘world premiere recordings’ (as the record labels like to say, albeit so often erroneously). This makes the point that the number of works of the Renaissance and

pre-Renaissance to attract more than a handful of recordings is assuredly small. But one of these, Lassus's *Lagrime di San Pietro*, has seen two new recordings appear in the past year, both of them rather fine, as well as neatly contrasted in approach. The Capella Ducale Venetia, directed by Livio Picotti (*Orlando di Lasso: Lagrime di San Pietro*, CPO, 999 862-2) uses a mixed vocal distribution with a consort of recorders, viols and chamber organ accompanying *colla parte*. This works very well in practice, since the instruments add body and presence to both ensemble and individual parts. There is little of the kaleidoscopic play of textures that Paul van Nevel brings to bear in his instrumentally lavish reading (Sony Classical, SK 53373, *rec* 1993). As far as I am aware, this is the first recording of the work by Italian singers, and it is therefore a surprise to find that Picotti and his musicians read the score quite as 'straight' as they do. With their superabundance of word-painting (on both literal and rhetorical levels), the *Lagrime* lend themselves to a fair deal of pushing and pulling of unwritten variables. One can imagine Concerto Italiano having a field day with it (and perhaps one day Rinaldo Alessandrini will tackle it), but among the existing readings it is Philippe Herreweghe's Ensemble Vocal Européen (on Harmonia Mundi, HMX 2981483, *rec* 1993) that makes the

most of the work's expressive potential. Alongside Herreweghe's interpretation Picotti's is a touch monochrome, though perfectly enjoyable on its own terms; a more characterful offering comes from Hofkapelle, directed by Michael Procter. On *Orlando di Lasso: Lagrime di San Pietro, Melancholia* (Christophorus CHR 77255, *rec* 2001), these seven male singers zip through the cycle in just over 40 minutes. Technically, they sound more confident than Picotti's singers, more capable, perhaps of standing on their own, and they possess a robust collective identity that engages the listener through the length of the cycle. Although the tempo adopted for the cycle (one might just as appropriately say 'the speed') causes them few problems, the combination of a brisk tempo and a richly resonant acoustic prevents them from bringing out many of the details that make this music so special; for the same reasons, the words can be indistinct, and individual notes placed outside a conjunct line give the impression of having to be caught at pace. That may sound like a fair bit of criticism of a recording that has many qualities, so it may be just as well to emphasize that it is one of the stronger recordings in a strong field.

What makes Hofkapelle's disc particularly appealing, however, is the 'B-side' of their programme. One advantage of racing through the *Lagrime* at such a clip is the opportunity this affords to include more music. Here Procter follows a suggestion, made to him by Peter Bergquist, that a collection of motets, produced by Lassus near the end of his life, be seen as a cycle along the lines of the *Lagrime*, and may perhaps even have been conceived as a pendant to them. The texts are a collection of brief aphorisms, some of them rather pointed. This has prompted Procter to give them the collective title, *Melancholia—aphorisms on life and death*. (He mentions in this connection a similarly titled collection by Lechner; he might also have mentioned Jakob Handl's *Moralia*, which have similarly aphoristic texts and may actually have predated Lassus's motets.) In these pieces Hofkapelle take things at a more relaxed pace than they do in the *Lagrime*, and the results are frequently splendid. It certainly enhances one's experience of these lesser-known items to hear them alongside the more famous *Lagrime*, and also to think of them as their spiritual companions. An astute piece of programming, this, and a way of encouraging the listener to speculate on the many threads, unravelled by time, linking the production of this extraordinary composer.

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