

Nordic Voices
Djånki dan

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Review from
www.musicweb-international.com

Nordic Voices is an a capella group which was founded in 1996, specialising in contemporary music which is both of the utmost in artistic integrity, but which also has a compelling and often surprisingly approachable nature. They have toured all over the world and performed to great critical acclaim, both at contemporary music festivals where this kind of music is a staple diet, to more off the beaten track venues, where a well-developed sense of humour can often convert the uninitiated to the unexpected.

This SACD hybrid has some remarkable sounds. Lasse Thoresen and Henrik Ødegaard both use the technique of overtone singing – transforming the sound of the voice with the shape of the mouth, not however to be confused with the more extreme specialism of throat singing. Traditional folk styles from Norway such as *kveding* also appear, as well as microtonal scales and harmonic relationships. All of these things might add up to some kind of aversion therapy music, but with Nordic Voices' sweet natural sound the technical aspects in the music become secondary, and the overriding impression is of strong communication and expressive shapes and sounds made by composers who work with, rather than against the human voice.

Lasse Thoresen's *Diphonie I* has no real text, and the title *Djånki dan* or '*jonkidon*' is an example of one of the invented combinations of sounds which the singers are instructed to use. Both Thoresen's and Henrik Ødegaard's works are part of a project which aims to bring together traditional vocal techniques with the discoveries of the last 50 years. *Diphonie I* creates a fascinating sound-world, enhancing recognisable and sometimes quite snazzy tonalities with extended vocal sounds, the unison colourings given by the ensemble generating effects which are simultaneously strange and familiar. *O Magnum Mysterium* by Henrik Ødegaard is based on a responsorial chant for Christmas Day, and the beauty of this familiar line alongside the shifting character of intimate colours and almost shouting, exuberant highs is hard to describe in words.

Asbjørn Schaathun's *Verklärung* is based on texts by Georg Trakl, an expressionist poet who took his own life after experiencing the traumas of World War I. This is a more intimate piece, with slowly shifting chords and tonal relationships both consonant and dissonant. The ethereal,

dreamlike qualities in this work contrast well with the surrounding pieces, with the final dissolution of the choral sound into nothingness having an unforgettable quality.

David Brattlie's piece derives from the Old Testament Book of *Lamentations*. The work is in two sections: a darker first half expressing hopelessness, and a brighter second section which introduces 'a sliver of aspiration'. The music is filled with rather desperate sounding dissonances and clusters, using some fragments of traditional Jewish song. This resolves into a more open sounding second section, which includes elements of Gregorian chant, but in all its religious self-absorbedness this is one of the less accessible works on this disc.

Cecilie Ore's *Schwirren* uses a text from a novella called *Das Fliegenpapier* or 'The Flypaper' by Robert Musil. The text for this and all of the other pieces is included in the booklet in both the original language and English, making for a fascinating read. The flypaper is an analogy for human as well as actual and graphic insect death, and is used as such by the composer: "a requiem, a slow, drawn out moment of death." An element of burlesque, gallows humour does appear however; "Tragedy and comedy go hand in hand..." Echoing consonants 'M.M.m.m.m.m.mmm...' create texture, and spoken text contrasts with sustained notes and chords. All of this is interrupted by a number of almost painful musical outbursts. At over 20 minutes one might suspect this to be too much of a good thing, but the material is strong enough to sustain, chill and challenge from beginning to end. This is a fascinatingly poetic musical response to a remarkable text, executed by a crack team of singers.

The final work is *Plym-Plym* by Kåre Kolberg, and is the only piece not written especially for Nordic Voices. The arrangement from the original for choir and vocal quartet was however an adaption made with the permission of the composer. One of the popular post-war hits of Norwegian vocal music, it is full of just about everything, "a creative eruption moving in all directions at once, from complete cacophony to super-commercial, anodyne pop." As Frank Havrøy's vivid descriptions would lead you to expect, this is a superb finale to a fascinating disc.

The SACD sound on this release is incredibly spacious, the recording set in a perfectly resonant acoustic which enhances the already marvellous Nordic Voices into a production which should be on every contemporary vocal-music fan's wish list. If I can persuade just a few of you to try this instead of yet another version of, let's say Handel's *Messiah*, then we'll all have evolved just a little step further towards an enlightened connection with what some of the best of today's music has to offer.

Dominy Clements

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