



Nordic Voices CD REVIEW

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Lamentations (CHAN0763)

Transcends category and criticism

I’ve been a fan of Nordic Voices since reviewing their *Djånki dan* CD, and this is another remarkable, indeed stunning disc. The first thing which will strike you is the photograph on the front. This is listed as ‘A vehicle bomb Improvised Exploding Device detonated near a Green Zone checkpoint in Baghdad, Iraq, the morning of 14th July 2004.’ This by no means used as a gimmick, though it will certainly make this release stand out from the crowd in the early music section of your local shop, if you have one. Nordic Voices state that they will donate a portion of the group’s royalties from sales of this disc to UNICEF, so not only will you have one of the vocal discs of the year in your collection, you will also have made a contribution to a very good cause indeed.

With only six voices, the relatively compact ensemble of Nordic Voices invites comparison with other similar single-voice-per-part vocal groups. The balance here is equally divided between female and male voices, with two sopranos, one mezzo, tenor, baritone and bass respectively. This means that the sonorities are different to the all-male Hilliard ensemble, whose Gesualdo *Tenebrae* recording on ECM 1422/23 has long been a favourite of mine. The sheer beauty and emotional intensity of Gesualdo’s *Tristis est anima mea* benefits greatly from the sharp clarity of single voices, and while Nordic Voices do not shy away from the drama in this music they do take a purer, more restrained approach than I’ve been used to. The Hilliard Ensemble have more heft in terms of vibrato and extremes of gesture, and seize more in terms of compressions in tempo - coming in at 4 :23 to Nordic Voices’ 5:49. If you do not know this piece, hang on through the searing white-knuckle virtuosity of the setting at least until that most magical and serene of moments, *et ego vadam immolari pro vobis*. If you see someone listening to their iPod and weeping, there is a fair chance they are playing this track, or the final *Tenebrae factae sunt : Et inclinatio capite, emisit spiritum*.

As the title of this disc indicates, all of the works in the programme are lamentations or *Tenebrae*, a celebration during the last days of holy week in which the Passion of and burial Christ is represented with the extinguishing of fourteen candles, the *miserere* then sung in darkness. Victoria and Palestrina belong in the Rome tradition and therefore have similarities in their

approach to these lamentations. Direct comparison is invited with the performance of both composers' version of the moving *Lectio III, Feria V in Coena Domini. Iod - Manum suam misit hostis*. Both composers create remarkable and beautiful settings: that of Victoria filled with expressive line and shape, Palestrina creating restrained intensity through tightly wrought counterpoint and some heart-stopping harmonies. I've always been more a fan of Palestrina over Victoria, but even with the latter's less overtly daring use of dissonance, the Nordic Voices ensemble have shown me qualities in his work which I seem not to have perceived or appreciated when hearing it with full choirs.

Robert White is probably the least familiar name in this programme. Flourishing all too briefly in the troubled English religious environment of Elizabeth I, White worked at the cathedrals of Ely and Chester before becoming Master of the Choristers at Westminster Abbey by 1570. If, like me, you adore those juicy dissonances which contemporaries such as Thomas Tallis created, you only have to wait 2:24 minutes before the world begins to melt. After catching moments like this you should be reaching for your wallet and muttering 'I must have this...' At nearly 18 minutes this is by far the longest setting on this disc, and getting through larger chunks of text in a sustained and deeply moving work of almost symphonic scale. All texts are given in the booklet by the way, translated from the Latin into English, German and French.

True, a disc filled entirely with lamentations is not the one you will be picking for lighter moments and dancing, but there is something compelling and attractive about a sequence of pieces whose emotional content are so rich and so consistently gorgeous. Nordic Voices sing with enough sibilance to articulate the words but avoid over-emphasis, and employ a minimum of vibrato. This is used only very occasionally to allow certain voices to shine through in an entirely natural and deeply moving way; or to sustain harmonic moments - tricking the brain into feeling their resonance beyond change or decay. Specialists in all kinds of vocal expression, this ensemble's control of intonation and phrasing is absolute. Their default ensemble colour is warm and deep, though they do of course create a remarkable range of texture and timbre. Compare the urgent projection of *Exclamans Jesus* with the final, chocolate-dark resonance of the final *emisit spiritum* in that final Gesualdo Responsorium and you will hear what I mean. The continuous contrasts and attention to detail are what transform the more restrained Victoria from a religious fug into a tapestry of fascinating expressive melodic gesture, and what prevents one's attention from wandering during the lengthy span of White's setting. Chandos' excellent recording is entirely sympathetic to the superb singing, with a wide, well-defined stereo spread and perfect proportion between presence and resonance in the marvellous church acoustic.

This disc is recommendable on all levels. The only note which jars is the juxtaposition of the words 'early music' over that cover photograph. Yes, this is 'early music', and is performed in a way which would hopefully satisfy your 'early music' experts. I however believe, and feel Nordic Voices would also agree, that this is music for all of us, and for all times. Baritone Frank Havrøy's short essay in the booklet confirms this standpoint, and also explains the reasons for wanting to support UNICEF. We in the West may have lost that absolute faith which characterised the era in which these pieces were composed, but if the tenderness and human empathy expressed in this music and these performances could somehow be delivered to and understood by those whose absolute faith results in the kind of destruction symbolised in that photograph, then there would be a greater hope for mankind.

-- Dominy Clements, MusicWeb International

(http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2009/Oct09/Lamentations_chan0763.htm)