

Nordic Voices

with the Norwegian Radio Orchestra

CD Review

"Nordic Voices is an amazing ensemble... faultlessly tuned, pitches unhesitatingly placed... a high-wire act with no safety net and incredibly exciting on that level alone."

KVERNDOKK ¹*The Seven Last Words of Christ. Mass for Six Voices.* ²*Fuge der Zeit* • Rolf Gupta, cond; Nordic Voices; ^{1,3}Norwegian RO Strings; ¹Gonzalo Moreno (pn); ³Terje Baugerød (org) • AURORA 5077 (70:09) • FANFARE

First things first: Nordic Voices is an amazing ensemble. This is some of the most fearless singing I have heard; the singers throw themselves into this difficult music as if it were the easiest repertoire in the world to perform. Some of this should simply be unsingable, but here it is, faultlessly tuned, pitches unhesitatingly placed where there appears to be no reference, in textures so spare and transparent that there is no place to hide. And this with but six remarkable voices. It is a high-wire act with no safety net, and incredibly exciting on that level alone.

But add to this that Norwegian composer Gisle Kverndokk writes staggeringly inventive choral music, hair-raisingly exciting, unbearably beautiful passages following moments of electrifying intensity or ear-popping dissonance. It is a roller coaster of emotional concentration, hushed anticipation, and towering catharsis. It is music that drains and restores simultaneously: simply an extraordinary experience.

The genesis of all three works is as complex as the music, though all three have in common the Nordic Voices, for who they were written or adapted. *The Seven Last Words of Christ* for six singers, two string quartets, double bass, and piano is inspired by the Haydn work of the same name—and even makes reference to it—by way of a 2014 chamber opera *Påske* (Easter), from which the choral parts are adapted. The opera is based on the Strindberg play. *Mass for Six Voices* started as a 2002 *Missa Brevis* with Kyrie and Gloria alone commissioned by the chamber choir. As it was for a celebration of composer Fartain Valen, Kverndokk used Valen's second piano sonata as a starting point. Both movements make striking use of vocal glissandi, aleatoric murmuring, and an occasional onomatopoeia ("ring"), which could seem gimmicky if they were not so brilliantly integrated into the expressive language. Nordic Voices prevailed upon the composer to finish the mass, which he did in 2009 with terse Alleluias, a strangely unsettled Credo, assertive only

Artist Management

at certain key points as if it was a struggle, a cacophonous Sanctus, and an Agnus Dei that becomes more peaceful as it progresses: marvelously complex responses to all of the texts. Best of all, *Fuge der Zeit* is a stunning setting of four of Romanian/Jewish author Paul Celan's poems of the holocaust experience in counterpoint to the "To everything there is a season" passage from *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (3:1-8). Commissioned to create a piece on that Biblical text for SATB chorus with strings and organ, the composer was brought up short by the assertion that there is a "time for war." This wrenching work, with its exploration of the true cost of human conflict, was his response. Ironically, while dissonance is still central to the compositional palette, *Fuge der Zeit* is in many ways the most conventionally beautiful of the three works and in any case, a profoundly moving experience. This six-voice version was created for the Nordic Singers.

The sound is clear and bright: in fact a bit too bright for my taste in the first two works, with the voices a little too close, as in a pop recording. It is not off-putting, but I don't think a little more space around the singers would have lessened the impact. Will there be other recordings of these three compelling works? I doubt it, as there are but a handful of choruses capable of negotiating their many technical hurdles. But no matter, what we have here is perfect. Urgently recommended to any collector of cutting-edge contemporary music and/or extraordinary choral singing. **Ronald E. Grames**