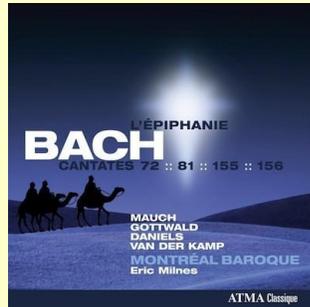


Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

Special Christmas Edition

2013



L'Épiphanie (ATMA Classique) is the fifth in a series of Bach cantata programs by Eric Milnes and Montréal Baroque celebrating the feasts of the church year. In this instance, it's the Feast of Epiphany, commemorating the Visit of the Magi which symbolizes the discovery or sudden revelation (which is what "Epiphany" means) of the Son of God by the gentiles. The season usually begins January 6, but has been observed at other times and in various ways by the various churches.

As opposed to the Christmas season, the time for songs of joy and praise as well as down-to-earth revelry, Epiphany, at least to the Lutherans of Bach's day, was a season of reflection on the pain and impermanence of earthly life, the threat of Hell, and the wisdom of leaving salvation entirely to the God's mercy. (No manger scenes with ox, ass, and shepherds for that crowd!) The title of Cantata BWV 72, *Alles nur nach Gottes Willen* (All according to God's will) expresses a sentiment found in every one of the four cantatas (Nos. 81, 72, 156, 155 in that sequence) in the present program.

The seriousness of the German texts is reflected in the striking fact that there are no choruses, which would have added a festive note. The focus is strictly on the living word. As such, there is a premium on the vocalists, who must bear the burden of these works. Fortunately for Milnes and Montréal Baroque, they are all first-rate: German singers Monika Mauch (S) and Franziska Gottwald (A), English tenor Charles Daniels, and Dutch bass Harry van der Kamp. The purity of Mauch's voice in an aria of high spiritual beauty such as *Mein Gott, wie lang, ach lang!* (My God, how long, ah how long?) in BWV 155 is particularly commendable.

While the music is definitely not festive in any of these works, instrumentalists do have some distinguished moments, such as the bassoon accompanying the alto/tenor duet in BWV 1055. Also the beautiful



"Welcome Yule!" (MSR Classics) is the lead song and the title of this engaging collection of classical works, carols, and good old American favorites celebrating Christmas. That reflects the style of the choral programs by Sursum Corda, based in Mountain Brook, Alabama, a Birmingham suburb where director Lester Seigel is organist and choir director of Canterbury United Methodist Church. The members of Sursum Corda (Latin for "Lift up your hearts") are distinguished for flawless intonation, perfect blend, and the lovely sound they achieve in all voices, particularly in the upper ranges.

The warmth and clarity of the group of 20 voices serves the carols and popular selections well. They include such favorites as *The Christ Child*, *Golden Vase Carol*, *Sussex Wassail*, *Deck the Halls*, *Jingle Bells*, *Jesus, Jesus, rest your head*, *We wish you a Merry Christmas* and *Have yourself a merry little Christmas*. *Silent Night* never sounded lovelier or warmer than in this rendition where a glorious soprano takes the lead, backed by other women's voices. Several French Noël's are heard in English versions: *Born Today is the Child Divine* and *Angels we have heard on high*, the former a more or less straightforward arrangement, and the latter with an ear-catching drone effect and minor key motif in a modern setting by Matthew Culloton.

Classical works include glowing accounts of Anton Bruckner's *Virga Jesse floruit* (The staff of Jesse has flourished), a setting of O, Magnum Mysterium (O, Great Mystery) by Malcolm Archer that uses 20th century effects to re-create the sense of holy awe and breathless wonder in the timeless text, and Marc Antoine Charpentier's *Messe de Minuit pour Noël* (Midnight Mass) in which the simple beauty of the voices is supported by an



This is Vol. 55, last in the series of Bach's: almost 200 sacred cantatas that Masaaki Suzuki began with the Bach Collegium of Japan back in 1995 (Bis hybrid SACD). At the time, it must have seemed a curiosity for a Japanese to undertake a project like this. But over the years, Suzuki has built up a world-class ensemble specializing in Bach. The Collegium singers are in fine form here, sounding the themes of praise and joy that we associate with Bach's cantatas.

The strings reinforce these themes with a warm, rich sound that serves the music well. Special kudos for the three oboists whose radiant sound underscores the mood in the various arias of acceptance and rejoicing at God's mercy. The solo vocalists - Hana Blažiková, soprano; Robin Blaze, counter-tenor; Gerd Türk, tenor; and Peter Kooij, bass (Czech, English, German and Dutch, respectively) are all excellent.

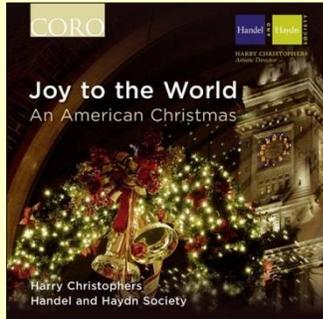
The three Cantatas heard here are Nos. 69, *Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele* (Praise the lord, O my soul); 30, *Freue dich, erlöste Schar* (Rejoice, redeemed hosts), and 191, *Gloria in excelsis Deo* (Gory to God in the highest). Only the last, which is almost identical with the wonderful setting of the Gloria in the Mass in b minor, is specific for Christmas Day. But all manifest the joy of the believer in the goodness of God and the promise of salvation, themes appropriate for the season. The words of the tenor recitative in Cantata 30 "Patience! The day cannot be long distant now when you will be totally freed of the torments of earthly imperfection" must have been especially meaningful for Bach, a passionate man who was often painfully aware of his own flaws.

Cantata 30, in particular, is one of Bach's longest and best. The opening chorus *Freue dich* reflects a vigorous Christian optimism, and the alto aria

oboe melody in the Sinfonia to BWV 1056, which will be immediately recognizable to listeners from its use by Bach in the Arioso of his Keyoard Concerto in F minor...and by the Beatles in *Hey, Jude!*

Noël for organ, as was the custom. The voices of Sursum Corda are as lovely as they are seamlessly perfect. Highly recommended.

Komm, ihr angefochtenen Sünder (Come ye troubled sinners) with the echo effect of a shepherd calling to his stray sheep, is unforgettably beautiful.



“Joy to the World,” An American Choral Christmas
Harry Christophers directs the Handel and Haydn Society
Coro Records

This is the first studio recording for Harry Christophers on the Coro label since he took over the reins of the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston. He admits he was surprised when he first began rehearsals with the chorus and was greeted with the response, “But Harry, these aren’t the tunes we know.” I mention this in case home listeners have similar expectations. This is not a collection of carols and traditionals in familiar pop settings, nor is it intended as a sing-along. These renditions showcase all that a world-class chorus can do in the way of stylishly layered voices, swelling tones, soaring phrases, and hushed cadences. Choralese is definitely spoken here.

Christophers, who achieved fame as founder of the early music a capella choir known as The Sixteen, for which Coro is the house label, has been at pains to research historical variants of such time-honored favorites as *In dulci jubilo*, in (A) an original version sung in English with a florid 18th century final verse by J.S. Bach, (B) a 16th century German version by Pretorius, and (C) a handsome 19th century version by R.L. Pearsall. *O Little Town of Bethlehem* is heard in both American and English traditional versions. Settings by famous composers are also to be found here, such as Morten Lauridsen’s sublime version of *O magnum mysterium*, the hushed wonder of Gustav Holst’s setting of Christina Rossetti’s *In the bleak midwinter*, and Herbet Howell’s moving hymn *A Spotless Rose*, one of three variants in this program of the 15th century carol *There is no rose of swich vertu / as is the rose that bare Jhesu*. Even Charles Ives gets in the act, in a remarkably straightforward and dignified setting of *A Christmas Carol* in which he leaves his customary “wrong notes” at home.

Other traditional favorites include *I wonder as I wander*, *Joy to the world*, *It came upon the midnight clear*, and the English version of the French Noël *Angels we have heard on high*. American psalmist William Billings is heard in *Shepherds, rejoice* and a rousing version of *A virgin unspotted* in which the chorus “Then let us be merry, put sorrow away; / Our Saviour, Christ Jesus, was born on this day” savors more of the tavern than the church, reflecting perhaps Martin Luther’s dictum that “the devil shouldn’t have all the good tunes.” Bob Chilcott’s hauntingly beautiful *Shepherd’s Carol* (2000) shows us the spirit of Christmas hasn’t died yet. And the Mykola Leontovich favorite *Carol of the Bells* finishes the program with a virtuosic choral flourish.