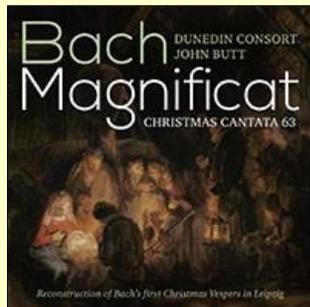


Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

Baroque & Christmas Special

December, 2015

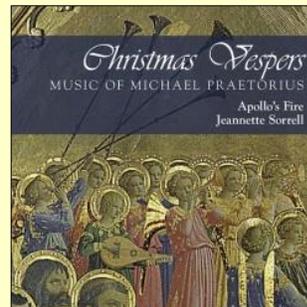


Bach: Magnificat in E-flat, BWV 243a; Cantata BWV 63
John Butt, The Dunedin Consort
(Linn Records hybrid multichannel SACD)

"Magnificat" is slightly misleading as the album title, for the present offering from Linn offers more than just the E-flat version of Bach's great Magnificat in D with the special Christmas interpolations. It also includes the "Christmas" Cantata, BWV 63, and an introductory 8-part motet by Giovanni Gabrieli, "*Hodie Christus natus est*" (Christ is born today), a half-dozen Bach chorale preludes for organ, and two lusty congregational chorales on the texts "*Von Himmel hoch*" (From heaven on high) and "*Puer natus in Bethlehem*" (A child is born in Bethlehem). For those who haven't had enough of this well-filled 78-minute program Linn offers four bonus tracks as free downloads on its website at www.linnrecords.com

The concept behind this CD is to reproduce as closely as possible the excitement of the occasion on which Bach gave his first program of Christmas vespers in the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig, December 25, 1723. Obviously, the new cantor must have loaded the program with all he had to make the occasion even more stunning. Personally, I would have been content with just the two major choral works, but each to his own taste. The performances by the Dunedin Consort under director and organist John Butt leave little to be desired. The sound recordings, made by producer-engineer Philip Hobbs at Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh 27-31 July, 2014, are warm and natural-sounding, vibrant without being at all fussy. As listener, you feel as if you were there.

Butt's solo vocalists are virtually all veterans who have performed on memorable occasions with him before: Joanne Lunn (Soprano), Claire Wilkinson (mezzo), Nicholas Mulroy (tenor), and Matthew Brook (baritone). The exception is soprano Julia Doyle, whose lovely voice is heard to good effect as Soprano I in the Magnificat, and serves to illuminate such passages as "*Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae*" (He hath regarded the lowliness of his maidservant). Wilkinson and Brook are tremendously successful in the alto-bass



Palestrina: Christmas Vespers
Jeannette Sorrell, Apollo's Fire
(Avie Records)

Curiously, considering that you are apt to hear more of his music during Christmas than any other composer of olden times with the exception of Handel, not many people know much about the life of Michael Praetorius (1571-1621). In his day he forged a rich body of vocal and instrumental music that mixed Italian polyphony with German counterpoint and chorale. As a musical theorist as well as composer, and therefore engaged in a scholarly pursuit, he was entitled to use the Latin form of his family name – which was a rather commonplace Schulz, or Schultze - without appearing pretentious.

Praetorius took much of his basic material from the hymns based on simple German folk melodies, even including tavern songs, that were written by Martin Luther (who famously said that "The devil shouldn't have all the good tunes"). In his lush harmonizations and imaginative arrangements of these hymns, he was probably the best ally Luther ever had, as he raised popular music to the level of high art.

For this program, Jeannette Sorrell, founder and director of Cleveland-based Apollo's Fire, has put together two plausible sets of Vespers, a Lutheran Advent Service and a Vespers Service for Christmas Day. They fit together like charms, these assemblages of diverse elements from Praetorius' immense body of work. In the Advent Service, we have chorale, hymn, and carol, plus German settings of the Credo and Gloria from the Latin mass, with five dances from the ballet *Terpsichore* as an opportunity for the instrumentalists to show their stuff. For the Christmas Vespers, we are served up a glorious mixture of hymn, antiphon, chorale, and carol, with Parts III and IV of the Magnificat as a stirring reminder of the power and mercy of God and a fine organ voluntary just before the closing hymn. The hymn is Praetorius' ever-popular *In dulci jubilo*, sung both in Latin and in the familiar English version, "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice!" That ends the program on a rousing note.

duet “*Gott, du hast es wohl gefüget*” (God, you have disposed it well) which is the heart of the matter in BWV 63, where it is supported by one of the warmest and loveliest obbligati Bach ever wrote for oboe.

Elsewhere, Brook’s “*Quia fecit mihi magna*” (For He hath magnified me), Mulroy’s “*Deposuit Potentes de sede*” (He hath unseated the mighty) and the fine terzet for the three women’s voices “*Suscepit Israel puerum suum recordatus*” (Remembering his mercy, he hath helped his servant Israel) are among the highlights of the most satisfying recording I’ve heard of the E-flat version of the Magnificat. And the sweeping chorus “*Fecit potentiam bracchio suo*” (For He hath scattered the mighty by the strength of his arm) has just the right amount of irony in the words “*superbos mente cordis sui*” (the proud in the imagination of their own hearts) to be effective. Warmly recommended.

The arrangements by Sorrell are a tribute to Praetorius, himself a past master of the art of arrangement and harmonization. The choral forces, which include the Oberlin Choristers and the children’s choirs of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights in addition to Apollo’s Singers and a select youth choir known as Apollo’s Musettes, blend their voices perfectly in plainchant and polyphony, shaping the supple contours of Praetorius’ musical lines to perfection. The string and wind bands and the continuo players, all members of Apollo’s Fire, support the vocalists and choirs with perfect naturalness as they intertwine with the vocal lines. The timbres are so flavorful you can taste them. These December, 2005 recordings, released for the first time on Avie, are ageless. They are not dry historical accounts, but rather living evocations of the art of a real master.

The program includes some of Praetorius’ most enduring melodies, such as “*Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*” (Come now, Saviour of the Nations), “*Wachet Auf*” (Sleepers, Awake), “*Es ist ein Ros’ Entsprungen*” (sung in English as “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” and the afore-mentioned “*In dulci jubilo*.”



“December Celebration,” New Carols by Seven American Composers – Lisa Delan (s), Lester Lynch (b), with the Volti Chorus and New Century Chamber Orchestra under Dawn Harms (PentaTone SACD)

This album of new Christmas songs and carols showcases seven American composers. They are, in the order of the program, Mark Adamo, Jack Heggie, William Bolcom (with Joan Morris), David Garner, Luna Pearl Woolf, Gordon Getty, and John Corigliano. They did not come together by accident. Getty, one of America’s wealthier citizens, who is a philanthropist as well as composer, seems to have been the catalyst. Whether he had a hand in underwriting the project is a matter of conjecture, as his name is (perhaps modestly) absent from the booklet acknowledgements. At any rate, it was a worthy undertaking. The recordings, produced by PentaTone’s Job Maarse at Skywalker Sound, San Rafael, California, are very good.

The song texts are, on the whole, quite effective, often to the point of intrigue. Old spiritual concerns merge with urgent contemporary ones as the timeless themes in the Christmas story become new again. With all the elements necessary to realize this program, including soprano and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, and a chamber orchestra with harp and percussion, this is a diverse bag of presents. Some are bright and shining, and others (truth to tell) more like lumps of coal.

First out of the bag is Adamo’s energetic song “The Christmas Life,” a holiday wish that comes across as more frenetic than anything else. Heggie’s The Road to Christmas for soprano and strings includes settings of poetic texts by A. E. Housman, Frederica von Stade, John Jacob Niles, Emily Dickinson, and the composer, plus an imaginative conflation of the traditionals “Good King Wenceslas” and “Ding dong merrily on high.” Delan, as soloist, has many of her best moments here, ending in a Christmas wish by Heggie himself.

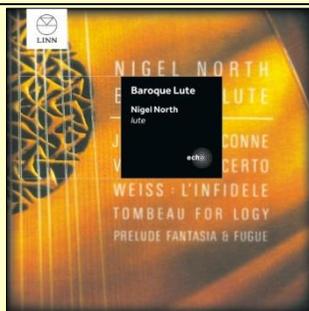
Morris and Bolcom collaborate in the carol for mixed chorus and piano “Neighbors, on this Frosty Tide,” originally found in Kenneth Grahame’s childhood classic The Wind in the Willows. The musical setting has the customary gentle swing of the Wassail song in such lyrics as “Neighbors on this frosty tide, / The wind is blowing, there’s snow beside, / So let us sit by your fireside, / And joy will be yours in the morning.”

Garner’s Three Carols is elaborate, ambitious, and intriguing in its settings of verses by Thomas Breidenthal. “Posada” alternates the voices of Lester Lynch and Lisa Delan as Joseph and Mary, urgently entreating shelter for

the night. They are less effective as a duet in “Magnum Mysterium,” which uses the opening verse of the old Medieval Latin canticle, with English interspersed, as a refrain for rhymed stanzas conveying the blessings of the manager animals. The latter come across as emblems of mankind, as in the hen’s fervent hope for “a newly fashioned world / in which my chicks can look for help / from viper’s brood and lion’s whelp.” “Jesus’ Song,” a prayer for peace through redemption, comes across almost in spite of the operatic-like vocal setting, where a simpler, plainer setting would have been more effective. In many places in Three Carols, I found Lynch’s stentorian phrasings less than pleasing, especially as it was not compensated by any appreciable warmth in the middle register. I did not get the impression that he and Delan were a duet made in heaven.

“How Bright the Darkness” by Pearl Luna Woof is an imaginative setting of a poem for the Winter Solstice by Eleanor Wilner. It features the plangent tones of harp, percussion and strings under the solo voices and treble chorus. Getty’s Four Christmas Carols, to his own lyrics, make for a charmingly diverse quartet of settings, mostly about the bustle and the breathless waiting for Christmas from a child’s perspective. One little quirk is that the order of songs 3 and 4 in the booklet is reversed in the actual program. That was probably a last-minute decision based on the perception that the closing measures of 3, “Run to the window,” evoking the sweep of soft wind and drifting snow, make it a better choice to end the set: “Children, where does the wind blow, / And where does the world go, and our Christmas song? / Tell us, here in the starlight, / Here in the snowfield, snowing all night long.”

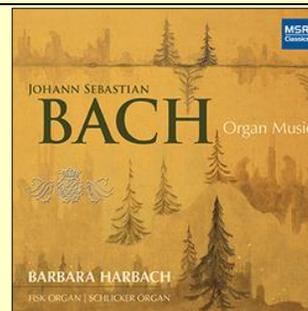
What can I say of John Corigliano’s frantic, tessitura-straining “Christmas at the Cloisters” for baritone voice and Hammond organ? Hopefully, it would not deter you from the experience of hearing an actual concert at the famous medieval branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art if you are in New York for the holidays. Finally, we have three arrangements by Getty of Franz Gruber’s immortal “Silent Night” in English, French, and the original German lyrics, a perfect way to end the program.



“The Baroque Lute”
Nigel North, lutenist, plays Weiss, Vivaldi, Bach (Linn Records)

In case you missed this 1990 jewel, Linn Records have brought it back in their Echo series. It’s a welcome return, too, as Nigel North, who was evidently self-taught on the lute, brings his gorgeous tone and quiet, deliberate artistry into play in showcasing some of the most beautiful works in the Baroque repertoire.

Mainstays of the program are works by Sylvius Leopold Weiss (1687-1750), a contemporary and friend of J.S. Bach who was considered the greatest lutenist of the age. He was particularly noted for his ease in playing harmonic variations and giving at least the illusion of true counterpoint on the lute, something many had previously doubted was possible on a non-keyboard instrument. We are treated first to his Sonata in A minor, known as “*L’infidèle*.” North attributes the curious name to the fascination in Vienna with all things Turkish following the siege of that city by the Turks (“Infidels”), although it might equally be a veiled allusion to infidelity on the personal level. As evidence, the artist cites the use of augmented seconds and a drone in the Musette as proof of near-eastern influence. A stunning cadence



Bach: Organ Music
Barbara Harbach, organist
(MSR Classics)

“Johann Sebastian Bach: Organ Music.” The bare words don’t begin to describe the riches in this CD. In a marvelous example of scholarship allied with style and technique, Barbara Harbach gives us one of the most deeply satisfying Bach recitals I’ve heard in some time.

There are actually *two* recitals here. Tracks 1-5 were recorded on the Fisk organ of the Downtown Presbyterian Church, Rochester, NY, Tracks 6-11 on the Schlicker organ of the First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lyons, NY. The former has, to my ears, a slightly warmer sound, and the latter a marginally more incisive one. First-rate balance engineering gives the impression of a single, cohesive program.

First up is the Prelude and Fugue in E-flat, BWV 552. The prelude is a synthesis of French overture, Italian concerto, and German fugue, with vividly contrasting passages. The Fugue proper is known as the “St. Anne,” after the accidental resemblance of its first subject to the tune of the English hymn “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” As Albert Schweitzer pointed out in

and chord change in the Sarabande, coming like a pang of remorse, makes me suspect the latter theory. At any rate, it is a very handsome suite (*not* a sonata) that shows Weiss' style at its best.

Other works by Weiss include the Prelude, Fantasia, and Fugue, found as separate pieces in the British Library, but played here by North as a plausible and attractive suite, and his *Tombeau sur la morte de M. Comte de Logy*, the composer's best-known piece. North, ever alert to nuances, calls our attention to "the irregularity of the rhythm and also the Doppler effect of the pitch" in the funereal bell-tolling passages at the beginning and the rising scale near the end, signifying the lightness of the soul rising to Heaven (a wonderful moment in the present recording).

North next "collaborates" with J.S. Bach on a reworking of Vivaldi's Violin Concerto, Op. 3, No. 9, which Bach arranged for harpsichord as BWV 972. North changes the key from D to F, simplifies the texture, and incorporates Bach's ideas on bass and ornamentation. Could anything have been simpler or more attractive?

Finally we are given North's arrangement of Bach's Chaconne from Violin Partita No. 2, long held to be one of the world's supreme masterpieces of instrumental music. The wonderful changes of mood and character that occur upon the key change at the 3:38 mark and the heightening and relaxing of tensions at about 10:00 and 11:00 have a profoundly moving effect on the listener. It is a handsome tribute paid to the master of an earlier age by one who is perhaps the pre-eminent lutenist of our own time.

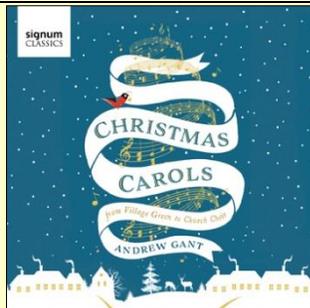
Jean-Sebastien Bach, le musicien-poète (1905), the triple fugue is a symbol of the Holy Trinity, ending in "rushing semiquavers as if the Pentacostal wind were coming roaring from heaven."

The most remarkable feature of Toccata and Fugue in F, BWV 540, is the jaunty, zestful upswing in the second subject of the toccata, as if the music were sweeping us toward the Kingdom of Heaven on the backs of fiery steeds. Adventurous harmonies, startling modulations, and dramatic chord insertions add to the excitement.

"*An Wasserflüssen Babylon*" (By the waters of Babylon), BWV 653, is an ornamental chorale in the style of a Sarabande. The Psalmist's lament in the first section is followed by calm, uplifting hope in the next. The other chorale prelude on the program, "*O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde gross*" (O man bemoan thy grievous sin) contrasts Passion-like gravity with a rising bass line in the part of the chorale concerning Christ's sacrifice.

BWV 546 in C minor consists of a stentorian 7-part Prelude and an amazingly supple 5-voice Fugue. BWV 542, the "Great" Fantasy and Fugue in G minor, is prized by Harbach as much for its "harmonic boldness, chromatic shifts, and enharmonic perplexity" as for the countersubjects and added motifs that propel the mighty fugue to its final conclusion.

Finally, we have the Prelude and Fugue in E minor, BWV 548 as a fitting conclusion to a satisfying program. As Harbach explains in her highly readable notes, this work is called the "Wedge" because the opening fugal subject starts with one note, followed by two notes on either side, forming a minor triad, and then gradually widens into an octave (another evocation of the Trinity). The concluding Fugue is bold, free, and utterly brilliant.



"Christmas Carols from Village Green to Church Choir" Andrew Gant, Vox Turturis, with David Quinn, organ (Signum Classics)

Here is an irresistible program of Christmas carols, folk songs and traditionals by Vox Turturis under its founder and director Andrew Gant. This professional choir has been drawn from the finest London-based ensembles, many of its singers trained at Oxford and Cambridge. It has just the right proportions (4 each of sopranos and altos, 6 each of tenors and basses, plus 2 boy trebles who would seem to be Gant's own sons, James and



"A Scandinavian Christmas" Choral Arts Northwest, directed by Richard Sparks, with David Dahl, organist (Loft Recordings)

"A Scandinavian Christmas" actually appeared some 15 years ago. This is the latest reissue of an album that should never be allowed to drop out of the discography, for it is a choice program, beautifully performed and recorded, of Christmas songs and organ chorales that new listeners typically fall in love with. And you don't have to know any of the Scandinavian languages in order to fall under its spell. I can tell you that from

Harry) to fit the needs of this sort of music to perfection. The nicely proportioned, beautifully textured sound of the ensemble seems to always reach the right pitch and the optimum harmonic density called for by the texts.

The arrangements, all by Gant himself unless otherwise specified, are as imaginative as they are lovely to hear, and the sounds of the choir, from overwhelmingly beautiful cadences to wisps of ethereal spiritual beauty, are enchanting. Only the occasional British idiom (such as “dawnce” for what dancers do) will sound a trifle amiss to American ears. But that’s a critical flyspeck when compared to the overall charm of this album.

The program encompasses many familiar favorites from the English carol tradition, which Gant himself describes as “a rich pudding, a glorious muddle.” These carols have origins that are sometimes long ago and far away. The program is arranged roughly in the order of the events in the Nativity story, beginning with “The Angel Gabriel,” appearing to Mary at the Annunciation with eyes of flame and “wings as drifted snow.” “*Veni, Veni, Emmanuel*” (Come, O Come, Emmanuel) combines Latin with English verses in “a kind of truncated 500-year history” (Gant). As elsewhere in this program, you will be tempted to sing-along yourself, which is a measure of the album’s success.

Some of the best-loved carols of all nations are here: the English folk carols “The Holly and the Ivy” and “I Saw Tree Ships,” “*O Tannnbaum*,” sung in flawless German, and two French Noël’s, “Ding, dong, merrily on high” and “*Les anges dans nos campagnes*,” known in English as “Angels from the realms of glory.” And so it goes, from Charles Wesley’s “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” in Mendelssohn’s setting, to “Still, still, still,” an English version of an original German hymn, and from the rare and lovely Gaelic traditional “The Christ Child’s Lullaby” to the deliciously dissonant “*Personent hodie*” from a 16th century Finnish choir book, which allows us to hear those two trebles to good advantage.

We conclude with “What child is this?” in a different arrangement from its original publication to the tune of “Greensleeves,” and two traditional Wassail favorites, “Twelve Days of Christmas” and “We wish you a Merry Christmas.” There’s even a bonus in the form of the springtime carol “*Tempus adest floridum*” (Spring has now unwrapped the flowers) with just a suggestion of a pendulum-bass and a tune that sounds suspiciously like that of “Good King Wenceslas.”

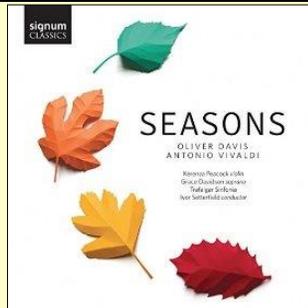
experience, not being conversant in Norwegian, Swedish, or Danish. It doesn’t matter. The joy and the breathless beauty of these Christmas songs translate universally to every listener.

This album has it all. We are given favorite holiday songs from the Scandinavian countries, sung in the original languages and conducted by Choral Arts Northwest artistic director Richard Sparks. They are interspersed with organ pieces based on such Lutheran chorales, familiar from their settings by J.S. Bach, as “*Von Himmel hoch*” (From Heaven above to Earth I come,) “*Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*” (How brightly shines the Morning Star), and “*Nun Komm, der Heiden Heiland*” (Come now, Savior of the Nations) plus an uplifting “*In dulci jubilo*” which you probably know in English as “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice.” These, plus a Sinfonia da chiesa by Sweden’s most famous baroque composer John Heimlich Roman, all sound grand performed by Dahl on the new Fritts organ of Pacific Lutheran University and recorded in 24-bit sound. As well they should, since Loft Recordings has long been a favorite label of organ fanciers.

The hymns and carols on this program benefit from stylish handling by Sparks and the superb voices, in ensemble and as individuals, of the 25 members of Choral Arts Northwest heard in this program. There is great warmth and sensitivity to textual nuances in these songs, essentially embodying the patient expectation of the holy birth, the sense of wonder and awe that Christ came to save us all, and the joy of the dawning of Christmas morning. Much of this music is slow, quiet, and lush in character, a mood reflected by the photo of a snowbound church on the booklet cover. Such songs include “*Den yndigste rose*” (Most Precious Rose) and “*Deilig er den Himmel blaa*” (Oh, How Beautiful the Sky).

Too quiet and lush for Sparks’ liking, as he reveals in his informative booklet notes, where he confesses he was at pains to discover faster, happier songs such as “*Jeg er så glad*” (I am so glad on Christmas eve) and Carolyn Jennings’ English arrangement of “*O Jul med din glede*” (O Yule Full of Gladness) to which Sparks back-fitted the original Norwegian text, in order to provide variety.

Personally, it doesn’t matter to me. The mood of quiet waiting and breathless awe in the wonderful old, slow, lush-sounding songs struck a responsive chord in me, and I think it will for you, too.



Oliver Davis: Anno + Vivaldi: The Four Seasons
 Grace Davidson, soprano; Kerenza Peacock, violin
 Ivor Setterfield conducts the Trafalgar Sinfonia
 (Signum Classics)

The Trafalgar Sinfonia was created a few years back by its music director Ivor Setterfield in order to accompany the various choirs he directed in and around London. It soon developed into a truly professional ensemble, performing in all the major London venues. It is currently staffed by outstanding instrumentalists, predominantly young women, from the music colleges. As we hear in these recordings, it has a distinctive style of its own, with a lithe and attractive string sound.

Which brings us to the origin of the present CD. The project grew out of discussions between Setterfield and Soho-based composer Oliver Davis on the possibility of creating a concept album based on that classic-of-classics, Antonio Vivaldi's Four Seasons, complimented by an original work, perhaps for voice and strings, on the same general subject. After combing around for suitable poetry based on the seasons of the year, Davis came to the happy conclusion that he could do no better than the four *sonnetti* that Vivaldi himself had employed as a guide in creating his sensational panorama of the changing year. How fortunate a choice it was, we can judge for ourselves in the lithe-sounding, economical settings by Davis of Vivaldi's poems, enhanced by the fresh-sounding performances of the Trafalgar Sinfonia. With a mere duration of 19:46, Davis' new work, entitled *Anno*, is filled with deft, finely etched details that do full justice to the poetic texts without belaboring any of the details. It all sounds to good effect over the very effective passages in the strings running underneath the score and illuminating what the composer has to say.

Major credit here goes to Grace Davidson, whose pure soprano voice, combining flexibility with just the right degree of lightness and warmth, is ideal for this work. In addition, she interprets the poetic texts with the greatest insight, with Italian diction worthy of a native speaker. That's important because the numerous elisions and glides in the vocal settings make it essential that one really understand the language, or else it would all fall apart. Davidson's performance exudes true joy and endless pleasure.

Aided by the superbly elegant artistry of violin soloist Kerenza Peacock, playing a Guarnerius on loan from



"Gabrieli"
 Performed by the National Brass Ensemble
 (Oberlin Music hybrid SACD)

They call themselves The National Brass Ensemble because they had to have some kind of name to go by on the album cover. But the appellation actually fits, in that this group of 26 musicians represent the cream of the brass sections (plus supporting artists on timpani and percussion) of the symphony orchestras of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, and San Francisco. They came together by design, specifically to honor another recording occasion: the celebrated 1968 Columbia recording of the music of Giovanni Gabrieli by brass groups from three major orchestras and organist E. Power Biggs.

Considering the busy schedules of today's symphony musicians, it was nothing short of a miracle that all these players got together for the recording sessions at the Skywalker Sound Stage in San Rafael, CA on June 11-14, 2015. With Paul Eachus and Robert Woods as producers and Michael Bishop in charge of the session engineering, mastering, and Surround mix, it should come as no surprise that the end results were absolutely stunning. From the opening bars of Gabrieli's Canzon on the 7th Tone No. 1, we sense we are in for a real audiophile-class treat.

Why Gabrieli? Well, you have to understand that brass musicians accord this seminal figure the same sort of reverence that organists hold for J. S. Bach. Giovanni Gabrieli (1554-1612), as composer and chief organist at the Cathedral of San Marco, commanded such respect among contemporary European musicians that many travelled great distances to hear his music and learn from him. In both his sacred and instrumental music, he explored sonority for maximum effect, including the interplay of spatially separated groups of singers or musicians. That included the works for brass that he termed *canzone* (songs). An English visitor to Venice, Thomas Coryat, famously recalled the effect of Gabrieli's rapturous music on the listener, "so super excellent that it did even ravish and stupefy all those strangers that never heard the like." In particular, he described the way Gabrieli's writing exploited the unique acoustic properties of San Marco, where a soft voice might unexpectedly materialize like a ray of sunlight from a side chapel.

the London firm of Ingles & Hayday Ltd, the companion work, *The Four Seasons*, comes up sounding fresh as new paint. That's no easy task when you consider that Vivaldi's signature masterwork has been recorded some 200+ times and counting. Of note here are the opening Allegro of "Autumn," with its depiction of happy peasants bringing in the bountiful harvest to the evocations of songs and the foot-falls of dancers. The following Adagio molto, depicting the sleeping revelers after the dancing, is handled with a lighter touch than I have heard it done elsewhere. (I very much like that approach: these are country folk in peaceful slumber, not snoring drunks sleeping off a toot!) In the Largo of "Winter," the depiction of simple contentment sitting by the fireside as the snow falls softly outside, is done by the Trafalgar as beautifully as I have heard it on record.

The program comes across as an exciting collaboration between composers over the distance of almost 300 years, helped in no small measure by the very attractive quality of Oliver Davis' music. He compliments Vivaldi on his own terms without quoting a single note of his Venetian forebear. As a finish to the program, Davis includes a short piece entitled *Anno Epilogue*, based on a key theme from *Anno*, recalled in a reflective mood. Nice touch, that.

Gabrieli was the great-great-great grandfather of the modern symphony. In re-creating his music, the present band of 24 brassy gents and two lady hornists were at pains to conjure up the sounds of two instruments that no longer exist. The early trombone had a smaller bore and less flaring bell than its modern counterpart, giving it a light, tightly focused tone that made it ideal for accompanying vocal groups. The cornett, no relation to the modern instrument of that name, was a wooden horn with finger holes and a small, cup-shaped mouthpiece that could sound uncannily like a human voice. In recapturing the Gabrieli sound, the present musicians employ brilliant phrasing, utilizing slurs and double-tonguing as needed to produce special effects. They convey a graciousness and warmth in the instrumental canzone that recall vocal works such as "*O Magnum Mysterium*" and "*Sancta Maria*" and the urgent note of supplication in the motet "*Exaudi me, Domine* (Hear me, Lord). The gloriously cascading fanfares at the conclusion of *Canzon per Sonar No. 2* make for a scintillating conclusion to the program.

As an epilog, and as a tribute to the wizardry of the modern brass musician, composer John Williams gifted the performers with a dashing new work especially composed for the occasion, *Music for Brass*. Smart pacing by the Ensemble pulls it off to satisfaction.



Hindemith: *The Long Christmas Dinner*
Opera in One Act ; Libretto by Thornton Wilder
Leon Botstein, American Symphony Orchestra
(Bridge Records)

This is a *really* unexpected find. Paul Hindemith's last opera, *The Long Christmas Dinner*, in one act, premiered without much fanfare at the Juilliard School in March, 1963 and has pretty much dwelt in obscurity ever since. The present revival by Leon Botstein, at the helm of the American Symphony Orchestra, is the first recording ever of the English language version (an alternative libretto exists in German). It comes just in time to rescue from obscurity this choice example of the piquant humor of both composer Hindemith and librettist Thornton Wilder. Not to slight the German version which was recorded in 2005 in Berlin, but this mischievously incisive story does have elements that are particularly meaningful to an American audience.

The story and its setting are easy enough to follow. Following the strains of a slow, lugubrious rendition of "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen" by the orchestra, four generations of an American family named Bayard get together for an annual Christmas dinner over a period of some 90 years. It is all so familiar as to be mundane. The men talk avidly about the future prospects of the family firm, which in the course of time becomes "Bayard and Brandon and Bayard." The women haul out family genealogies and recite them from time to time. The gent whose function is to carve the Christmas turkey invariably asks "White meat or dark?" Mother Bayard, matriarch of the family, recounts the pioneer days when "We crossed the river before we knew its name. / There was no city here, but there was a church, / And everywhere Indians, Indians and forests."

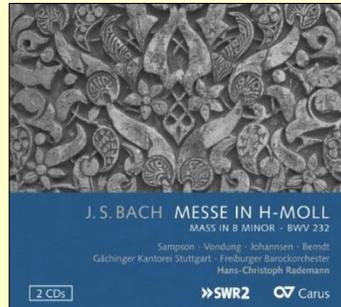
Always, there is the relentless tread of time, reflected in the men's empty optimism in the future and the women's lament that "The chiden are growing so! I wish they'd stay as they are." The passage of time is the unseen enemy. Over the years, Bayards come and go and the family business grows, but so does the soot and noise of the encroaching city. "Time flies so fast. / The sun and the shade / In a moment are past. // We come and go. / The joy and the woe / In a moment are past." Even the query "Do you prefer dark or light?" takes on meaning in the course of the story: we have a choice in this life as to whether we wish to focus on the darkness or the light, and *that* is a comfort. The final words of the libretto, delivered by Cousin Ermengarde as she reads the news, shocking in terms of family tradition, that some of the Bayards are actually building a *new* house, carry added emphasis because they

are the only spoken prose in the entire opera: "Fancy that!"

It is important to visualize the stage as seen from the audience. There is a door at stage left and another at stage right. Both are symbolic. Through the former stream new beginnings: births, engagements and wedding announcements. Through the dark door at stage right, characters depart from the scene from time to time. On the imaginary map in the audience's perspective, that door is on the "west" side of the stage, just as "going west" has long been a euphemism for death itself.

In a story that makes its points subtly, out of seemingly mundane and inconsequential things, the interpretive abilities of the performers are of major importance. All are decidedly up to the task here, so let's list their names: Camille Zamora (s), Kathryn Guthrie (s), Sarah Murphy (m/s), Catherine Martin (m/s), Glenn Seven Allen (t), Scott Murphree (t), Jarrett Ott (bart), and Josh Quinn (b/bart).

Carus-Verlag, music publishers from Stuttgart, Germany, really got it right when they named the present offering a "Deluxe" edition. The handsome box set consists of two CDs and a DVD that gives us a lot of the background to this new version of Bach's B Minor Mass. Made with the assistance of one of the best European recording studios, that of Southwest Broadcasting (*Südwestrundfunk*, SWR 2) and the Bach Collegium-Stuttgart, it is a quality production all the way. The performances on CD sound great, and the DVD is more than just a mere promotion or a bonus.



This recording is based upon the new edition by the renowned Bach scholar Ulrich Leisinger in cooperation with the State Library (*Staatsbibliothek*) Berlin and the Bach-Archiv Leipzig. A lot of resources came together in the present CD+DVD production, but the end result comes across as something much more than a work-by-committee. It is a living testament.

J. S. Bach: Mass in B Minor, BWV 232
Hans-Christoph Rademann directs the Gächinger Kantorei, Stuttgart and Freiburg Baroque Orchestra
Carus Deluxe Edition, 2 CD + DVD

It is one thing to hear about the problems of editing the new edition. It is something else to actually see for ourselves in the DVD Bach's manuscript in its present state of decay. Bach used cheap paper and, as we hear in the discussion between scholar and choral director, "very aggressive ink." As a result, the ink often runs on the page or bleeds through from the other side. In some places, we can see actually holes in the paper and places where existing notes were scraped off in the process of revision (no "white-out" in those days!) We sense the anxiety of the aging composer to get it all down before the onset of old age and failing insight. As a further chapter in the drama, we can detect the hand of one of Bach's sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel, laboring to restore the manuscript to a legible form.

This opens up the tantalizing question of the younger Bach's role in creating the Mass as we have it here. As a loyal son who revered his father's memory, CPE Bach wanted to preserve this masterwork. He knew his father was a great man of music – maybe the *greatest* – and that posterity would bear this out if given the evidence. But he was also himself a composer of note. In some instances, did his musical instinct overcome filial devotion? We can only guess. At any rate, the completed Mass in B minor was never performed in its entirety in Bach's lifetime and was not published until 1845, almost a century after his death. At the time, its publisher proclaimed it "the greatest musical work of all times and all peoples," a boast that today seems more than mere hyperbole.

There's something to suit every viewer's interest in the 28-minute DVD program "Bach's Secret Legacy," as we follow the preparation of the new recording from scholarly research to the rehearsals of the Gächinger Kantorei and the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra under the guidance of Hans-Christoph Rademann, the sessions with the engineers in the sound booth, and the final moment when the performers meet the public. Throughout all of the preparations, we are aware of the presence of Rademann. An engaging personality who took over the direction of the Kantorei in 2013 after the almost 60 years tenure (1954-2013) of its founder Helmuth Rilling, Rademann does not seem at all daunted by the spectre of his predecessor as he goes about his way, letting his youthful charges know what he wants in the way of greater lightness, freedom, and communication among voices and instruments. As one who has been acquainted with the B Minor Mass since his boyhood days in the Dresden Cathedral Choir, he confesses to good and bad memories, with moments of supreme exaltation balanced against frightening memories of sheer exhaustion from performing a demanding 100+ minutes work. Consequently, he does a lot in the rehearsals to lighten things up, even playing the fool as needed on occasion to provoke a tension-relieving smile.

As a result, the recorded performances on these CDs get lighter, freer, and more spontaneous sounding as we move through the Mass. This is the first recording to use the meticulously detailed "Dresden parts" (*Dresdner Stimmen*) emanating from Bach's own pen. These include numerous instances of the syncopations known as "Lombard rhythms," which, together with a more liberal use of "slurs" (no offence, folks, it's a real musical term), add greater lightness to passages expressing joy and elation. In addition, Bach took pains in his revisions of the previously-penned Kyrie and Gloria to eliminate parallel fifths and octaves in the vocal parts, which are practically unavoidable in five-part textures. CD2 gives us bonus tracks, enabling us to hear the squarer sound of the *Domine Deus* (Lord God) and *Quoniam Tu solus sanctus* (For Thou only art holy) in the Gloria and in the entire Sanctus in the New Bach Edition (*Neue Bach-Ausgabe*) of 1954 in order to let us judge the difference between that version and what we hear in the present performance.

This is a nicely proportioned account of the B Minor Mass, with quite a few felicitous moments. The use of alla breve, or "cut" time, in the repeat of the *Kyrie eleison* (God have mercy), helping to lift spirits at this point, is one example. Another occurs in the *Gratia agimus tibi* (We give praise to Thee), where the same procedure reinforces the feeling of elation in the text. The lilting figurations in the flute obbligato supporting the *Domine Deus* (Lord God Lamb of God) help make the soprano/tenor duet by Carolyn Sampson and Daniel Johansson a pure delight. The 4-part choral *Qui tollis peccata mundi* (Who takes away the sins of the world) is appropriately sombre, to which the alto aria by Anke Vondung, *Qui sedes ad dextram Patris* (Who sits at the right hand of the Father), with its warm oboe d'amore accompaniment and 6/8 time signature, makes an immediate contrast. The bass aria by Tobias Berndt, *Quoniam Tu solus sanctus* (For Thou only art holy), with its gorgeously florid hunting horn accompaniment in 3/4 time (another dance tempo!), makes a favorable impression.

And so it continues through the second half of the Mass, the Nicene Creed portion. Throughout the Credo, the obligatory profession of faith, Bach made many alterations in texture and time signature in order to relieve the monotony of the only doctrinal portion of the Mass. The six-part Sanctus in quick 3/8 time and marked "Vivace," is brief but memorable. The final section, consisting of the Osanna, Benedictus, Agnus Dei and Dona Nobis Pacem, benefits from a variety of textures in the writing and is made even more striking by such features as the lovely flute obbligato in the tenor aria *Benedictus* (Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord). There is also the inescapable resemblance between the melody of the concluding four-part chorus *Dona nobis pacem* (Grant us peace) and what we heard earlier in the *Gratia agimus tibi* in the Gloria. "We give praise to thee." "Grant us peace." The promise of divine mercy has come full circle in one of the most completely satisfying works in all music history.