Reviews for John Sheppard Sacred Choral Music

In Gramophone (April 2014) the CD is Editor’s Choice. Andrew Mellor said:

Perhaps the most striking feature of this recording from the Choir of St Mary’s Cathedral, Edinburgh, is the way in which the trebles seem perfectly integrated within the ensemble: one thinks of other choral foundations in which the distinctiveness of the boy trebles’ timbre, though distinctive and even moving, makes it stand not only above but ever so slightly apart from the men. Is it the presence of girls here as well as boys that lends extra cohesion and vigour to the top line? I think so; and if I’m right, then this is eloquent advocacy for mixed trebles. Sheppard’s trick of having them divide into a triad for the final chord of sections is reminiscent of those concluding flourishes of a fireworks display that break into a cluster. The rest of the choir is equally well matched and solid, and the whole is recorded with admirable presence and clarity; a worthy successor to this choir’s very impressive recording of Taverner’s /Missa Corona spinea/ a few years back (3/10).

This anthology includes a few of the usual favourites (the more famous of the two /Libera nos/ settings, for example), but the choice of relatively brisk tempi precludes the reverential feel that has become something of a cliché of Sheppard interpretations generally. All of this culminates (perhaps – the whole disc is compelling listening) in the /Missa Cantate/, which lays fair claim to being Sheppard’s most accomplished work in this genre: the use of sequence, reminiscent of Taverner, is particularly confident. Having expressed polite reservations about Sheppard’s music a few months back, I’m delighted to draw attention to a recording that silences (or at least moderates) those doubts; anyone who’s ever shared them should hear this.

Stephen Pritchard of The Observer said:
“The rich polyphony of John Sheppard (c.1515-58), overlooked for centuries, enjoys a healthy respect these days, thanks to some scholarly rescue work in the 1970s. More recent reconstructions by Dr Magnus Williamson now allow us to hear yet more of Sheppard’s glorious music for the first time. His fantastically elaborate Gaude Virgo Christiphera suits the delightfully deft voices of St Mary’s Cathedral, Edinburgh, as does another revelation: Hodie nobis caelorum rex, a plainsong responsory for Christmas morning, with a little choir of trebles and a tenor singing Gloria in Excelsis way off in the distance. Magical.”

The Times gave it four stars and said:
“This revelatory disc offers compelling evidence that John Sheppard (c.1515-1558) has been grossly underrated, largely because of delays in reconstructing his magnificent motets and Masses. The polyphony is rich, the use of dissonance masterly, and great arches of music compellingly sustained over eight or ten minutes. Under Duncan Ferguson, the choir of St Mary’s Cathedral sings with fervour and plangent clarity.” Richard Morrison

The Independent gave it five stars and said:
“Sixteenth-century composer John Sheppard’s works have only begun to be restored to the choral canon since their rediscovery in the 1970s. But performed here by the Choir of St Mary’s Cathedral, Edinburgh under the direction of Duncan Ferguson, these pieces show him to be fully the equal of Byrd, Tallis and Taverner. With its ecstatic, keening trebles layered over a densely woven bed of lower-register voices, Libear nos, salva nos I make a sublime short opener, while the influence of Taverner is clearly evident in the florid melisma of Gaude virgo Christiphera. Elsewhere, Missa Cantate is a complex four-part Mass, while Reges
Tharsis et insulae exploits the Cathedral’s wonderful acoustics to the fullest with intense singing in all parts.”

February Early Music Review concludes:
“All the music is sung at pitch, so not upwardly transposed alla Wulstan. This makes an enormous difference to the musicality of these performances and surely points the way to the likes of The Sixteen and The Tallis Scholars, still inexplicably navigating the interstellar regions. Indeed such groups have a lot to learn from the pent-up energy in these engaging and thrilling performances, and I would thoroughly recommend this CD to anyone who has not yet sampled the work of Duncan Ferguson and his remarkable young choristers.”

MusicWeb International made it Recording of the Month:
Not long ago I was deeply impressed by a recording of music by John Taverner made by Duncan Ferguson and his fine Edinburgh Cathedral choir (review). Subsequently I heard them perform music of our own time, in the shape of a thrilling disc of music by Gabriel Jackson (review). Now they’ve returned to Tudor England to give us a recital of music by John Sheppard.

In an excellent, informative note Duncan Ferguson explains why Sheppard’s music has been under-performed and, indeed, somewhat neglected: to some degree this is because scholarly performing editions of his works only became available slowly and relatively recently. I have to admit that much of the music in this programme was new to me and one piece, Adesto sancta Trinitas II here receives its first recording while the recording of Hodie nobis caelorum rex is the first in which the music is heard as the composer apparently intended it.

Dominating the programme is the Missa Cantate. This is a Festal Mass on a grand scale featuring six-part writing. It probably dates from the 1550s and, more specifically, from the reign of Queen Mary I (1553-58) when Catholicism enjoyed a final brief flowering in England. I don’t know if it was written with a specific Feast day in mind. The setting of the Gloria features a good deal of elaborate writing. The Edinburgh choir launch themselves into this music in fine style and similarly into the Credo. In the Credo Sheppard’s busy textures are pared down dramatically for the ‘Et incarnatus est’ section, to telling effect. This means that when the full choir picks up the music at ‘Et resurrexit’ the impact is tremendous, as Sheppard surely intended. The Sanctus and the Benedictus are more restrained but both end with exuberant ‘Hosannas’. The Agnus Dei is wonderfully prayerful. As was common at the time there is no setting of the Kyrie so Duncan Ferguson takes the pragmatic approach of prefacing the Mass with a separate Kyrie composed for the Second Vespers of the Resurrection. The Mass is performed superbly; it affords a good number of opportunities for solos from within the choir and all these are very well taken.

Of the two pieces receiving premiere recordings it was the one that is here recorded for the first time as heard here that especially caught my ear. Hodie nobis caelorum rex is a setting of the first responsory for Matins on Christmas Day. What’s unusual about it is the vocal forces that are employed. Most of the text is chanted by the adult male voices of the choir. I like the way Ferguson paces the chant, which is an elaborate one; it’s taken at quite a brisk pace and thus conveys a spirit not just of joyfulness but also of some urgency. Part way through, however, the chant is interrupted briefly by the singing of the words ‘Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis’. This phrase is sung by three trebles and, in Ferguson’s description, ‘a very agile tenor’. I like his suggestion that this tenor might have been the vocal tutor to the trebles. These four voices are heard from a distance
and the effect is arresting.

*Gaude virgo Christiphera* (‘Rejoice, O Virgin, bearer of the Christ-Child’) is a Marian piece, the only surviving such piece by Sheppard. The treble part has not come down to us and we hear the work on this recording in a new performing edition by Magnus Williamson which sounds utterly convincing to me. This is an extensive, elaborate setting and Duncan Ferguson is surely right in making a comparison with the music of Sheppard’s illustrious predecessor, John Taverner. *Sacris solemnis* is a hymn, the words to which are by St. Thomas Aquinas. One verse is the celebrated text ‘Panis Angelicus’. Sheppard’s setting alternates verses of chant and polyphony. Of particular interest here is that most of the chant verses are sung in fauxbourdon, three-part harmony.

There isn’t a piece on this disc that isn’t full of interest. Ferguson says that David Wulstan, an early champion of Sheppard, described this composer as ‘an Olympian figure of mid-sixteenth century polyphony.’ Such is the quality of the performances here that Wulstan’s judgement seems apt. The Edinburgh choir has had a mix of girls and boys on its treble line for many years - since 1978, in fact. For this recording there are 19 singers on the treble line - 11 of them girls - plus three male altos, three tenors, four baritones and three basses. That we are going to hear a choir in fine form is evident in the opening piece, *Libera nos, salva nos*. The choral sound in this seven-part piece is bright sad well-focused; the lines are clear and the attack is excellent. That sets the standard for everything that is to follow.

The choir sings extremely well throughout but I hope that the gentlemen will not mind if I single out the trebles for special praise. There are a few photos of them in the booklet in which they look bright-eyed, lively and full of enthusiasm: that’s just how they sound, too. Sheppard’s writing is physically demanding, the tessitura often high and the phrases long. It’s also demanding of the intelligence for these young singers have to know not just how to navigate through their parts but, critically, how to do so making musical sense of the notes. These young singers are fearless in the face of these demands. They’re accurate too - there’s no pitching ‘in the crack’. Hats off to the Edinburgh trebles and, indeed, to the whole choir. Duncan Ferguson has clearly trained them expertly. I love to hear such music sung by small expert groups of adult singers such as The Tallis Scholars and The Sixteen. However, it’s just as pleasing to hear it well sung by a choir who would sing it in a liturgical context - the sort of choir Sheppard might have envisaged, albeit all-male in composition.

The impact that the choir’s performances make is assisted greatly by yet another fine recording by Delphian’s Paul Baxter. The first impression you have is that you’re quite close to the choir but, in fact, the sound image that Baxter has given us seems to me to replicate what one would hear seated in the quire. Yet the recording is not too close; the acoustic ambience registers pleasingly. The sound is sumptuous - as befits the music - but is also admirably clear, which is vital when dealing with these often-complex choral textures.

This is another outstanding disc from Duncan Ferguson and his excellent choir. More, please.

*John Quinn*