



Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen – Choir and Organ Christmas Music

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According to Audite the idea behind this collection is to create 'a link between the 16th and 21st centuries'; this it certainly does, encompassing music from the likes of Michael Praetorius and Morten Lauridsen. But, despite the unifying use of the 16th-century carol *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen* - prosaically rendered as 'A twig sprang forth' or, more poetically, as 'Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming' - I did wonder how comfortable these disparate elements would be on the same disc. Also, I couldn't see the logic of pairing a cappella works and organ improvisations of the same pieces; and, as the Vox Bona choir and organist Stefan Horz are both associated with Bonn's Kreuzkirche, why are the organ and choral contributions split between two different venues with very different acoustics?

Enough cavilling, what about the music? The German composer Michael Praetorius is credited with the first proper setting of *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen* in his *Musae Sionae* of 1609. The choir sing with astonishing clarity and focus right across the range, but there's not much sense of a church acoustic here. With nary a pause we are plunged into Horz's organ improvisation, which sounds rather bland compared with those of formidable French improvisers such as Marcel Dupré and Thierry Escaich. Traffic noises - always a problem when recording in public buildings - are very audible in the quieter, more sustained passages.

The 19th-century carol *Maria durch ein Dornwald ging* ('Mary walked amid the thorns') is sung here in a setting by Heinrich Kaminski, whose professorship at the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin in the 1930s was cut short by revelations of his Jewish ancestry. Now this sounds more like a church acoustic, with a greater sense of space and a pleasing 'ring' to the voices. Again, Horz's contribution cuts in too soon, but this time it's much more engaging than his earlier effort. Indeed, the music 'flowers' rather beautifully in the organ's higher registers, with warm, sustained pedals below.

The contemporary German composer and organist Wolfgang Seifen's setting of *Die Nacht ist vorgedrungen* ('The night is nearly over') also has unhappy connections with the Third Reich; the original carol was penned by Jochen Klepper in 1937, just five years before Nazi persecution drove him and his family to commit suicide. It's not a carol I know, so texts and translations would have been very useful here. That said, I soon found them via Google, and what a moving, albeit rather sombre, view of our redemption from 'guilt and pain'. Vox Bona sing it with a passion and feeling I've not heard thus far, Karin Freist-Wissing coaxing beautiful, well-blended sounds from her choir. Not uplifting in the traditional sense, perhaps, but for all that Seifen finds a dark radiance here that is utterly compelling. After music of such sustained intensity Horz's Messiaen-like improvisation could only be a let-down - and it is.

Moving north to Sweden, we have Gloria, Jan Sandström's hymn to the Mother of God. It's a multi-faceted work, with ethereal solos rising from the body of the choir and the singers dividing to create antiphonal effects. In feeling it reminds me of Knut Nystedt's Salve Regina, surely one of the most beautiful Marian settings around. This is first-rate singing, varied, virtuosic and, above all, deeply felt. The mood is spoiled by a rather tremulous start to Max Reger's Ave Maria. A hymn to Mary it may be, but that's not enough to warrant the latter's proximity - cheek by jowl, as it were - to the light and lovely Gloria. Poor programming? Yes, I'm inclined to think so.

At least the American composer Morten Lauridsen doesn't disappoint, his light-filled, awe-struck O Magnum Mysterium sung with great poise - and surprising inwardness - by Vox Bona. Those long, melismatic lines - which in themselves connect with a more distant devotional past - are superbly managed. High loveliness and proof, if it were needed, that this choir deserve a disc all to themselves. Brahms's take on Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen sustains the devotional mood rather better than Reger's Ave Maria, and for once I found myself engaging more fully with Horz's organ playing. As for Hugo Distler's variations on the same carol, from his Weihnachtsgeschichte, they are refreshing direct in style and execution. Add to that beautiful solos from alto Charlotte Quadt and you have a piece that really does capture the warmth and wonder of Christmas.