



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

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I'm usually averse to Christmas discs, but this one has a uniquely attractive programme which goes far beyond the usual familiar and saccharine seasonal fare. Taking Michael Praetorius' lovely setting of the C16th carol *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen* (A twig sprang forth) as a starting point, the 40-strong Vox Bona and organist Stefan Horz aim to provide create a contemplative link between the 16th and 21st centuries. Much of the music is little known outside Northern Europe, and interspersing a cappella choral works with organ solos provides a musical experience which can easily stand apart from its seasonal origins and be worthy of repetition at any time of the year.

PRAETORIUS, MICHAEL *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen* (choir)
Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen (Organ Improvisation)
 KAMINSKI, HEINRICH *Maria durch ein Dornwald ging* (choir)
Maria durch ein Dornwald ging (Organ Improvisation)
 SEIFEN, WOLFGANG *Die Nacht ist vorgedrungen* (choir)
Die Nacht ist vorgedrungen (Organ Improvisation)
 SANDSTRÖM, JAN *Gloria* (choir)
 REGER, MAX *Ave Maria Op. 80,5* (Organ Solo)
 LAURIDSEN, MORTEN *O Magnum Mysterium* (choir)
 BRAHMS, JOHANNES *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen Op. 122* (Organ solo)
 DISTLER, HUGO *Variations on 'Es ist ein Ros' from the Christmas Story* (choir)
 SCHLICK, ARNOLT *Maria zart, von edler Art* (Organ solo)
 SANDSTRÖM, JAN *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen* (choir)
 BACH, JOHANN SEBASTIAN *Ich steh an deiner Krippen hier* (choir)
 BACH, JOHANN SEBASTIAN *Pastorella in F major BWV 590* (Organ solo)
 BACH, JOHANN SEBASTIAN *Choral 'Ich will dich mit Fleiß bewahren' from the Christmas Oratorio* (choir)

The practise of organ improvisations based on Christmas pieces is an old French tradition. Stefan Horz makes effective use of the many tonal colours available on the 4-manual organ of the Kreuzkirche, Bonn. He is in contemplative mood for his first two. Jochen Klepper wrote the text for his carol 'The night has advanced' in 1937, and Johannes Petzold composed its mournful melody in 1939. This 8-part, densely harmonised setting for choir was made by Wolfgang Sieffen. Klepper, as a poet and writer, was persecuted by the National Socialists, and he, his wife and step-daughter eventually took their own lives in 1942. Stefan Horz's following improvisation unleashes the fury of the full organ as a stirring outcry against inhumanity, finding a quieter kind of peace at the end.

Swedish composer Jan Sandström (born 1954) composed his 'Gloria' after a dream, which he describes as follows: "In a church on a mountain high above Bogotá, a

children's choir sings the Gloria over and over again, during which first one child, then another and another steps forward to interject "Gloria in excelsis." Sandström has incorporated this pattern of fast switches from choir to a single chorister into his composition. This is an intensely personal expression of joy, far from the flamboyant Glorias in most Mass settings. The harmonies are delightful, spiced with vibrant dissonances, and the fresh-voiced Vox Bona sing it with total commitment, soloists emerging clearly from the body of the choir in a superbly balanced and realistic recording.

Morten Lauridsen's 'O Magnum Mysterium' for SATB divisi has justly become a modern choral classic. The sheer beauty of its slowly progressing melody touches the heart, with many cadences resting on tone clusters which provide a shimmering mystical atmosphere. The pure voices of Vox Bona, skilfully directed by Karin Freist-Wissing, imbue this jewel with delicate but fervent expression. Their superb breath and dynamic control produces a truly memorable experience.

Hugo Distler (b.1907) took the 'Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen' carol through a series of dazzling polyphonic variations with a modern touch. Following this, Jan Sandström's imaginative link between apparently disparate music styles arises by giving Michael Praetorius' near-perfect setting of 'Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen' to a group of soloists embedded in the full chorus, who produce a timeless, atmospheric, dream-like sound-scape of poignantly dissonant polyphonic strands.

The final group inevitably brings us to JS Bach, with two chorales and a substantial organ solo, the Pastorella, where Stefan Horz conjures charming C18th rustic sounds with buzzy gemshorn and dulcian stops interlinked with sweet flutes, the piece ending with a fine fugue.

Throughout, Vox Bona are magnificent. Their youthful, pure voices are well-pitched, even in tricky dissonant works; internal balancing is superb, with excellent sonorous basses (going palpably down to a soft D below the bass stave in the Lauridsen). The choir's singing is seemingly effortless. There is no doubting the depth of their Faith in these renderings, as this shines through in every piece. Thankfully Audite has given them a coherent and realistic recording, with believable depth and breadth in a glowing acoustic which never loses detail. Individual voices can be heard within the choir, rather than the generalised block of sound often encountered. Stereo balance is excellent, an extra acoustic halo enhances the realism on the 5.0 MC track as expected.

Audite provide very good notes on the music and its existential context in German and English, and supply specifications of the interesting Paul Ott organ (1956), which has several times been restored. A pdf file with full texts is available on the Audite website, as well as further information on the organ.

I heartily commend this as one of the best sacred choral discs which have passed my way this year, for its musicianship, technical flair and originality of programme.