



Touching Colours - Organ & Orchestra

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Gramophone (Malcolm Riley - 01.04.2004)

GRAMOPHONE

Saint-Saëns plus surround sound makes a stand-out item in this exhilarating concert

Recorded in St Annual's Collegiate Church, Saarbrücken, in February of this year, this Surround Sound disc deserves a wide circulation. There is only one 'core' repertory piece here, Saint-Saëns' ever-popular Organ Symphony, in a performance which compares most favourably with older and better-established recordings. The playing of the Saarbrücken Radio Symphony Orchestra is top-notch with highly-characterful woodwind contributions, incisive brass and timpani and marvellously warm, rosin-laden strings. Johannes Wildner's choice of tempo for the opening of the Allegro movement is brisker than many others, but the playing is totally secure: no chance of a derailment here!

The disc opens with another classic example of the supposedly irreconcilable marriage twixt organ and full orchestra, Barber's exhilarating and arresting Toccata Festiva of 1960. Organ soloist Christian Schmitt throws off the technical challenges (which include a dazzling three-minute-long cadenza for the pedals alone) with aplomb.

The organ concerto genre is broadened further by the première recording of Frank Zabel's Touching Colours (2002), a continuous movement lasting just over 13 minutes. Zabel (b1968) has taken his inspiration from an untitled abstract painting by his fellow Düsseldorf, Peter Bruning. Zabel explores the widest spectrum of timbres, combined with sparing use of quarter-tones and occasional forays into tonality. Fascinating and worthy of repeated hearings.

There is nothing remotely kaleidoscopic about the final work on the disc, the Teutonically solemn Festive Entry of the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem of 1909 by Richard Strauss, arranged by Max Reger and Johannes Koch. This rather dreary processional pales somewhat when compared to the rest of this edifying and satisfying disc. I hope that this team will continue to explore the fascinating organ and orchestra repertory of Jongen, Copland, Dupré, Guilmant, Harwood, Stanford, Widor and Whitlock, among others.