



Ex Oriente Lux - Choir masterpieces

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I tend to be skeptical when a line on a jewel box reads "A must for every ..." I was pleasantly surprised to hear this and confess that the phrase obtains in this case. The 40-voice choir of singers (not professional) is superbly trained and has an ample number of female singers whose pitch accuracy is to be envied. That skill is important with this literature, for it abounds in minor second intervals and long-held notes against changing harmonies. A glance at the names of the composers might frighten away would-be purchasers, but that would be a shame. These are very approachable pieces; some are already on the list of old choral standards (the Rachmaninoff and Grechaninoff have long been favorites for high school choirs and choral festivals).

I'll bet many readers who sang in their high school choir will remember Nystedt for his 'Cry Out and Shout'. The 'Adoro Te' is interesting in that the opening chord, heard note by note from bottom up, spells the overtone series. Karal's piece is a bit more modern in its combination of sung and spoken passages, and its whole choir glissandos here and there. But like so many of these pieces, the opening aggressiveness and angularity gives way to a relaxed, melodic conclusion with welcome diatonic harmony (Bardu or Eben, for example). Sisask's composition pits male voices against the female sections with chant-like episodes that reflect the religious origins of all these selections.

Penderecki's contribution is probably the most challenging work here, a mixture of harmonized chant passages contrasted with dissonant and forceful sections. One piece that could easily become popular for listeners and singers alike is the concluding Popovici piece. It is simple, diatonic, and allows the sopranos to carry the thematic material while being supported by the rest of the choir. It's a little gem. While I wish the basses had more presence in the Russian selections (cadences cry out for the lower octave), this is an outstanding choir. The balance is good and the pitch accuracy excellent. This should garner a wide listening population, to include school choir directors along with professional ensembles.