

AUDIOPHILE AUDITION

(recomposed for instruments by Igor Stravinsky); *Mass*; *Symphony of Psalms*; BACH/STRAVINSKY: *Choral Variations on the German Christmas carol "Von Himmel hoch"* – Collegium Vocale Gent /Royal Flemish Philharmonic Orchestra /Philippe Herreweghe – Pentatone

Stravinsky's neo-classical works include some of his most powerful religious music; those presented here appearing in a well thought out programme.



STRAVINSKY: Monumentum (1960); Pro Gesualdo di Venosa ad CD Annum (recomposed for instruments by Igor Stravinsky); Mass (1948); Symphony of Psalms (1930); BACH/STRAVINSKY: Choral Variations on the German Christmas carol "Von Himmel hoch"(1956) – Collegium Vocale Gent /Royal Flemish Philharmonic Orchestra /Philippe Herreweghe – Pentatone Classics multichannel SACD PTC5186349 [Distrib. by Naxos] 50:47 ***:**

Stravinsky's neo-classical works include some of his most powerful religious music; those presented here appearing in a well thought out programme from PentaTone.

The most well-known of these is the *Symphony of Psalms*, the earliest work on this disc, dating from 1930, and written after commission from Serge Koussevitzky to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Boston Symphony.

In three sections, the first opens with a feeling of insecurity and beseeching – "*Hear my Prayer, O Lord...*" – the words underpinned by the nervous rhythms and cries for assistance from the orchestra. The second section communicates relief at reaching safety – "*....He inclined unto me and heard my calling....*" – and the third, longer by far than the sum of the first two, sings the well-known praises of the 150th psalm in an effusive outpouring of thanksgiving. The tight rhythms are expertly handled by Herreweghe and his forces, especially the exceedingly fine Collegium Vocale Gent, a well-balanced and crisp choral force to be reckoned with. The fifty or so singers have ensemble sharp enough to cut through Stravinsky's textures with ease, adding to the tensions created by the writing, and the pianists, Jan Michiels and Inge Spinetti, are well-balanced within the orchestra.

Stravinsky wrote the *Mass* (1948) without commission, a piece following the liturgy in full and written for choir in four parts with instrumental forces consisting of ten wind instruments. Interesting colours result, as may be expected. In this case, a smaller choral group is used, about half the size for the *Symphony of Psalms*, producing a more intimate feeling. Tuning is generally spot-on – such exposed writing makes enormous demands on the performers – the soloists in the choir impressing with their contribution. Stravinsky had boys' voices in mind for the top two parts, and Hyperion's fine recording on CDA66437 gives that alternative for both the *Mass* and the *Symphony of Psalms*.

Monumentum, written in 1960 for Gesualdo's 400th anniversary, is based on three of that composer's madrigals. Here Stravinsky adds to the Renaissance music a 20th century flavour, cleverly reinventing harmonies and counterpoint. Again, such exposed writing requires ensemble of the tightest order from Herreweghe and the orchestra and the performance is riveting. Finally, Stravinsky's reinvention of Bach's "*Von Himmel Hoch*" *Variations* is rich in colour, Stravinsky having added even more to Bach's intricate counterpoint! In this piece, the choir seems a little more backwardly balanced, adding to the atmosphere.

Recorded at the beginning of 2009 at deSingel in Antwerp, the sound quality achieved by Roger de Schot and his team is exemplary. Only after a first listen to this disc did I read the notes and discover this recording is based on two live performances captured on successive days – what a well-behaved audience! A superb release.

-- Peter Joelson

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