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★★★★★ **Herreweghe, Collegium Vocale, RFPO: Stravinsky Music incl Sym Psalms: Mellifluous, Warm Readings-a Surprise Patina of Old School**, May 7, 2010

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This review is from: Monumentum / Mass / Symphonie De Psaumes (Hybr) (Audio CD)

This super audio surround disc offers us the iconic Symphony of Psalms that was done on direct commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra under their fabled music director, Russian double-bass player turned conductor, Serge Koussevitzky. As it happened, Ernst Ansermet actually did the European premiere of the work before Boston, but eventually this enduring masterpiece arrived in North America. Leading into this we are offered three rather different works, the 1960 Monumentum (Pro Gesualdo) - inspired if not even derived from three Gesualdo madrigals; then the 1948 Mass for mixed chorus and double wind quintet; and thirdly the 1956 Choral Variations (Uber das Weihnachtslied "Von Himmel hoch") of Bach, orchestrated and enhanced with even more layers of updated writing that owes much to carefully understood Baroque models, even while extravagantly reaching inside-beyond those models.

Each Stravinsky piece is given disciplined musical attentions, and lots of what can only be called musical devotion (if not, indeed, love?). The Monumentum is a brief piece that only lasts about six and a half minutes. Here Herreweghe uses it to set his musical approach going, replete with precision, warmth, and a somewhat nostalgic glow that seems to have been appropriated in laudatory aspect from Gesualdo and the intimate joys of madrigal. Then we go directly to the 1948 Mass which is not exactly a household pop standout in Stravinsky's oeuvre. Herreweghe manages to give us this admittedly austere work with proper nods to the warm, songful lights initially cast by the brief Gesualdo Monumentum, with the familiar markers of the great polyphonic masters. As the disc booklet says: "Almost the whole repertory of Renaissance Mass technique is manifested here: Gregorian paraphrase, syllabic chants, homophonic choir blocks alternative with interweaving polyphony, enhanced by antiphonal questions-and-answers, up to passing decorations on key text words like 'Gloria' or 'Sanctus'."

If any reading can get an unfamiliar listener past the severity of the Mass, Herreweghe must be on that short list for now. The Von Himmel hoch variations then return us to deeper roots and emphases that both the Momentum and the Mass have already initiated. As the booklet notes, Milton Babbitt once called Bach's variations, "... a cornerstone of canonic writing." The figural 20th century composer offers up his own take on transcribing notable predecessors, not only by daring to choose such an imposing predecessor as Bach in the first place, but by inserting layers of modern motifs and bringing an abundant sense of rich heritage to his whole enterprise. It all falls delightfully on the ear and the heart and the mind, with an lasting impact that one might term Mozartian, if by that one meant to recall Mozart's remarks about having something for everyone in his audience, learned folk and ordinary folk. Herreweghe and his players-singers reveal this odd (and seldom heard, in comparison with, say, the three early ballets?) piece as a humanistic triumph, at once a statement of warm human scope, lit up by divine-rational comedy.

If none of these three works immediately spring to mind when one recalls the Symphony of Psalms, in Herreweghe's hands they are prophetic in preparing the way, and the listening ear. By the time we actually get to the first movement of the Psalms, we are primed and ready to hear them anew. This is art concealing art, as if some great painting of the world's legacy were ever so carefully hung and lighted in exactly the right place for endless public exposure. I suppose we might laud Herreweghe and his capable forces for achieving the curator's arts so invisibly, all effort, all impact focused back upon the treasure to be appreciated and acknowledged.