

# Stravinsky: Threni; Requiem Canticles CD review – superb glimpse of late masterpieces

Collegium Vocale Gent/Royal Flemish PO/Herreweghe(PHI)

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**T**hough Stravinsky must rank among the most recorded of all 20th-century composers, the music he wrote in the last decade of his creative life remains relatively little explored. Philippe Herreweghe's recording with Collegium Vocale Gent of Threni, the 1958 settings of texts from the Old Testament Lamentations of Jeremiah, seems to be only the third in almost 60 years of what was the first and most substantial of Stravinsky's completely serial works. Requiem Canticles, from 1966, his last major work, which is paired with it here, has appeared on disc only a handful of times too.

Requiem Canticles may be a wonderfully compressed, almost aphoristic example of Stravinsky's spare, acerbic late style – the longest of its nine movements lasts only two and a half minutes – but Threni is an even greater masterpiece, which deserves a place among his finest achievements. Herreweghe's superb performance leaves no doubt about that, and his singers and the Royal Flemish Philharmonic make light of the challenges in what is still a fearsomely difficult score to perform. What emerges so clearly, too, is the Russian-ness that remained an indelible part of Stravinsky's music throughout his composing life, however much it shifted stylistically. In Threni there are hints of Les Noces (completed in 1921) in the way the solo voices and choir relate to each other and in the rhythmic chanting of some passages, while there are echoes of the even earlier Renard and Symphonies of Wind Instruments in the primary-coloured textures extracted from an orchestra that includes flugelhorn and sarrusophone.

All of that is made wonderfully vivid in Herreweghe's performance, and alongside Threni and the Canticles he also includes two unaccompanied late choral pieces, the anthem The Dove Descending Breaks the Air, a 1962 setting of a passage from one of TS Eliot's Four Quartets, and Da Pacem Domine, an unfinished Gesualdo motet that Stravinsky completed in 1957. Even with these tiny extras there's still only 47 minutes of music here, leaving easily enough disc space, one would have thought, for at least one of the other late biblical pieces, such as the Canticum Sacrum or A Sermon, Narrative and Prayer. These performances are so good, and the music so rarely heard, one can only want more.