

ARTS 47762-8 [72.11]

As I began typing this review, Giovanni Gabrieli, who almost certainly knew Lassus, the great maestro di capella of St. Mark's, Venice had been dead for 400 years and three days - 12 August 1612. 6 August, however, is the Feast of San Rocco whom the Venetians especially invoke as a saint who guards against the plague outbreaks which often exhausted the city of Venice as in London throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The idea of reconstructing a musical event for this Feast began with Paul McCreesh in 1996. He was likewise inspired by a visit one Thomas Coryat made to Venice in 1608. A great deal of his diary entry is quoted in Elena Sartori's gorgeous and brilliant excellent programme note. Coryat was totally smitten with the "admirable" and "delectable" music, sometimes in sixteen or twenty parts, accompanied by "sagbutts", "four cornets and two violadagamboes". He was especially impressed by a male singer whom he thought at first "an Eunuch, which if he had been would have taken away some of my admiration". Incidentally its worth searching out a book called 'Odd Tom Coryat' by R.E. Pritchard (Sutton Publishing, 2004) which gives a full account of this extraordinary man's travels across Europe and much further east, even into India. It transpires that this singer was "middleged as about forty yeares old". Coryat adds that "if a nightingale had been in the room, and contended with him for his superioritie, I think he could not much have bettered". From the researches made into payments for musicians in August 1608 it has been discovered that it is more than likely that this paragon of a singer (clearly a countertenor) was one Bartoloemo Barbarino who being also a composer is represented here by three motets for solo voice and continuo. These are in the new style, the 'seconda prattica' quite different from Gabrieli. Barbarino trained and composed in the era of the 'prima prattica'.

So this CD consists of organ solos, motets for choir and instruments, motets for solo voice, and instrumental *Toccatas* (touch pieces - quite virtuosic), *Ricercars* (often rather fugal or at least imitative), *Canzonas* (rather fantasia-like with several tempo changes) and *Sonatas*. So, in this excellently planned CD, there is much variety. With the inclusion of the famous *In Ecclesis* and ending with a superb *Magnificat* this would in many ways be a good place to start if you are, as it were, a Gabrieli virgin. In addition this disc has the advantage for some of being a hybrid SACD, ideal for this spacious repertoire.

The performances I feel are suitable and pleasing. Having said that I don't especially care for the sometimes hooty counter-tenor tone of Alessandro Carmignani in the Barberino motets. He seems to be struggling a little against the dark resonances of the large instrumental accompaniment. His diction is not allowed to shine through, partially I suspect, due to the acoustic which also, on occasion, creates its problems for the choir.

The instrumental groups and choir members are listed and it's worth taking a look at the chosen balance. There are just five solo singers, all men plus a 'Schola' of eleven voices - all men. La Pifarescha play 'Historic instruments' that is, Cornets and Trombones. Violins are listed as well as percussion and organ continuo, twentytwo players in all. They include no fewer than ten trombonists which includes one alto and three bass instruments. This enables the full effect of the 'chori spezzati' to be felt: one smaller choir against a larger one with a central instrumental ensemble. One can imagine standing high at the west end of St. Marks. Listen to the *Magnificat* especially to gain the best idea of what has been achieved.

A comparison could be made with a lovely and similarly planned recording by the Soloists of the Tolzer Knabenchor (VKJK 0019), which has just eight voices but includes three female sopranos. Here the twelve instrumentalists number seven trombones including three dulcians. What ever may be your preference its important to weigh these things up as the sound to coming out of these motets will of course be dictated by the chosen personnel.

If you know any older Gabrieli discs, say by the Ambrosian Singers in their 1967 recording under Denis Stevens (Classics for Pleasure 7243 5 86049 2 4) then you might have come to expect a massive and perhaps overpowering choral noise. On that CD is also recorded *Buccinate in neomenia tuba*, *In ecclesis* and the more restrained and extraordinary, chromatic and expressive *Timor et Tremor*. The Ambrosians use women on the upper lines as opposed to counter-tenors. Sadly there is always a feeling of too much vibrato in all those voices. Incidentally don't be too shocked by the opening track, and indeed by the penultimate one, both 'Fuga'. Elena Sartori is accompanied on the organ by a drum apparently because of "the clearly dancing tone of these compositions" and "free, unwritten parts were added providing rhythmic support". Ah, well, just enjoy. My main caveat however is that the texts have not been translated into any language whatsoever. That may not bother you much but it is nevertheless a little curmudgeonly of Arts.

Gary Higginson

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