

## Musica Sacra Hungarica

Carus-Verlag is a highly respected German publishing house specialising in choral music. Most choral singers will have Carus scores on their shelves, and choral directors have particular reason to appreciate these excellently produced editions. The Carus catalogue contains a number of albums of shorter pieces gathered together by theme. One of them is entitled *Musica Sacra Hungarica*, a collection of forty-one sacred works by twentieth-century Hungarian composers. Like others in the same series, this volume presents a perfect opportunity for an adventurous choral conductor to seek out lesser-known but attractive repertoire. A further help is the compact disc which the publisher has also issued and which features twenty-two of the pieces contained in the published volume.

The three pieces by László Halmos are very pleasing. Immediately attractive, for example, and within the scope of any good amateur choir, is the very first piece on the disc, *Jubilate Deo*, a simple piece of canonic writing using the pentatonic scale and featuring some very affecting, gentle hallelujahs. The notes tell us that ancient Hungarian plainsong was based on the pentatonic (five-note) scale, so it's perhaps unsurprising that this characteristic style found its way into modern choral sacred music writing in Hungary. It is to be heard again in Ferenc Farkas's lovely *Kyrie*, an extract from his *Margareten Messe*.

György Orbán is a more recent composer and his music is characterised by a rather more advanced harmonic and melodic language. The choral texture is more varied and inventive than is the case in the works so far discussed, and overall the music is rather more sophisticated and challenging. Singers won't be frightened off, though, nor will an unwary public! His *Ave verum corpus* is a particularly lovely piece, I think, and *Our Father* rises to a surprising climax just before the final "Amen".

Three other composers are represented by a single work. *Hodie Christus natus est* by Halmos is as lovely as it is easy to listen to. Harmat's *De profundis* is dark and anguished, as befits the words, though it ends on a tranquil major triad. *Dextera Domini* by Ferenc Kersch begins unpromisingly, uncomfortably close to a harmony exercise, and remains fairly predictable thereafter.

Many conductors of amateur choirs are familiar with the name of Lajos Bárdos, represented here by five pieces. *O gloriosa virginum* is a simple, homophonic strophic piece, charming in its way, and an attractive proposition for a choir's Christmas concert, but not particularly individual. His other pieces, however, demonstrate a sophisticated and highly-developed musical sensibility. His setting of the *Libera me* text is surprisingly dramatic and technically quite taxing for the choir, and his *Ave maris stella* is a real success, with some involved part writing, exposed lines and a number of particularly lovely cadence points.

György Deák-Bárdos was his brother. The two works included here set texts which would represent a real challenge to the greatest of composers, and many will feel that *Crucifigatur* ("Crucify him!") and *Eli, Eli*, which sets one of Christ's last utterances from the cross, seem more dutiful than inspired.

A collection of twentieth-century Hungarian choral music would be unthinkable without the great Zoltán Kodály, and he is represented here by five pieces. Two of them, *Pange lingua* and *Veni, veni Emmanuel*, are for three-part choir only. Their purity, simplicity and restraint demonstrate how, in the hands of a supreme master, less really can mean more. *Jésuz és a kufárok* is another matter. At six and a half minutes it is the longest piece on the disc, and rising in places to seven parts, it is also the most challenging to perform and to listen to. Often known by its English title, *Jesus and the Traders*, it vividly retells the story of Christ overturning the moneylenders' tables and angrily driving them from the temple. *Stabat Mater* sounds very easy, but as anyone who has performed it knows, the slightest deviation in pitch is immediately audible. *Esti dal* – *Evening Song* – is based on a folk-song. The humming accompaniment is only one attractive feature which has made this piece a firm favourite with choirs and audiences.

At almost seventy minutes, this is perhaps not a disc to listen to in one sitting. But it is far more than just a prop for those who buy the printed music. There is scarcely a dud amongst the twenty-two pieces, and several of them are, despite their brevity, masterpieces. The Monteverdi Choir of Budapest, founded in 1972, is conducted here by its founder. It is a fine group whose sound is perfectly adapted to the repertoire. Only once in the entire collection, and at a cruelly taxing moment, was there a single chord that I thought might have been retaken. This is choral singing as fine, convinced and convincing as you will hear anywhere. The recording is excellent. The booklet gives the words in Latin or Hungarian with a translation in German. The notes are informative, but not all of them are translated into English, leaving tantalising passages unexplored when one's school German is not up to the task.

A fascinating and lovely collection from a distinguished German publishing house.

William Hedley

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