

Baroque Vocal

CPE Bach

Magnificat. Heilig ist Gott. Symphony in D major

Elizabeth Watts *sop* Wiebke Lehmkuhl *alto*

Lothar Odinius *ten* Markus Eiche *bass* RIAS

Kammerchor; Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin / Hans-Christoph Rademann

Harmonia Mundi © HMC90 2167 (56' • DDD • T/T)



In part a homage to JS Bach's setting, the *Magnificat* can sometimes outstay its

welcome, above all in the gargantuan final fugue. Not here. Hans-Christoph Rademann and his Berlin forces make the strongest possible case for it, with fresh, athletic choral singing, playing of crackling, fizzing energy and excellent solo work. Elizabeth Watts is true and touching in 'Quia respexit' and contralto Wiebke Lehmkuhl brings a mingled warmth and purity to the beautiful 'Suscepit Israel'. Lehmkuhl also launches the *Heilig*, where the recording creates an ideal spatial separation between the distant angelic choir and the more 'present' chorus of nations on earth, singing in keys remote from each other. This is the finest recording of CPE's choral masterpiece I have heard.

Crowning the disc, the D major Symphony combines torrential energy, lyrical tenderness (in the hauntingly scored *Largo*) and, not least, transparency of texture, so that flutes and oboe lines really tell against the composer's trademark swirling, scurrying strings. This looks set to be one of the discs of the CPE Bach anniversary year. **Richard Wigmore**

JS Bach

St John Passion, BWV245 (1724 version)

James Gilchrist *ten* Evangelist Matthew Rose *bass*

Christus Ashley Riches *bar* Pilatus Elizabeth Watts

sop Sarah Connolly *contr* Andrew Kennedy *ten*

Christopher Purves *bass* Choir of the AAM;

Academy of Ancient Music / Richard Egarr *hpd*

AAM © 2 AAM002 (105' • DDD • T/T)



The opening chorus of any *St John Passion* will tell you much about the rest of the

performance and here the first impression is of its being fast and loose. Not fast as in the driven belligerence of some other conductors or loose in the sense of being scrappy; no, rather it is that the chuntering orchestral disquiet and smooth choral lines of Egarr's reading give it a sympathetic, aching kind of tragedy that contrasts with those readings that focus more on the sharp, stabbing agony of the cross – as if the emphasis is more on feeling the wider compassionate message of the Passion than on immediate reaction to the horror story of Christ's trial and suffering.

And indeed this is how much of the rest of the work is. Yes, there is urgency from the chorus in the trial scene, but not of the shouty hysterical kind you sometimes get. Some of the crowd choruses are even light and distanced. An aria such as 'Ach, mein Sinn' is presented as something gentle, almost resigned, instead of the usual hair-tearing angst; while 'Erwäge' is one of the most beautiful you'll hear (the viola d'amore playing here sweet as anything). Much of what makes this possible is the presence of soloists with naturally expressive voices who can also inject telling interpretative details, such as Elizabeth Watts's quick reining-in of the phrase 'Mein Licht' at the end of 'Ich folge' or impassioned surge of tone in the *da capo* of a heartbreaking 'Zerfließe'. They are moments that bring an almost Mahlerian penetration, as is the noble stillness of Sarah Connolly's 'Es ist vollbracht!'. Andrew Kennedy and Christopher Purves are also effective and kindly, if not possessing quite the same vocal lustre; Matthew Rose's Christus is youthful and manly; and Ashley Riches's Pilatus is complex and troubled (his 'Sehet, welch ein Mensch!' halting and uncertain of itself). And it comes as no surprise that James Gilchrist's Evangelist is on the highest level of clarity and narrative intelligence. In short, this is a *St John* with a distinct character of its own, and whether or not that will appeal is up to the listener.

Those who prefer choral singing with sharp-etched attack and refined blend may be disappointed by what they find here (and it must be said that the balance is not kind to the lower voices), but Egarr is good at using his 16-voice chorus to release the

music's natural line and warmth. That and its humanity.

Lindsay Kemp

Handel

L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato, HWV55

Julia Doyle, Maria Keohane *sops* Benjamin

Hulett *ten* Andreas Wolf *bass* Cologne

Chamber Choir; Collegium Cartusianum /

Peter Neumann

Carus © 2 CARUS83 395 (119' • DDD)



Milton's pair of poems characterising the polarised opposites of Mirth ('L'Allegro') and Melancholy ('Il Penseroso') were identified as a subject suitable for musical entertainment by Handel's friend, the philosopher James Harris, who drafted a libretto that was refined by Charles Jennens into an astutely paced dialogue between personifications of Mirth and Melancholy battling it out for aesthetic and moral supremacy. To provide a unifying conclusion, Jennens wrote 'Il Moderato', in which the sparring opponents are reconciled in the sublime duet 'As steals the morn'. The ode has a respectable discography but not even the most prestigious versions hitherto captured the full breadth of Handel's roller coaster through introspective musings and extrovert jolliness, resolving into amicable moderation whereby fun and studiousness can coexist.

Peter Neumann presents a complete uncut text and also incorporates several numbers Handel added to the 1741 revival. I suspect the original 1740 version flows more smoothly as an allegorical quarrel without the hindrances of the lovely additional songs but the ode's deliberately paradoxical elements flourish in Neumann's judicious performance. The Cologne Chamber Choir's English pronunciation is flawless and there isn't a whiff of rent-a-chorus freelancers on auto-pilot that sometimes hinders the best British groups; Neumann's choir is exemplary at phrasing, textures and diction – whether describing the 'busy hum of men' or tired revellers being lulled asleep. Collegium Cartusianum's playing has a