

GRAMOPHONE AWARDS SHORTLIST 2021

ideal mix of murkiness and eerie clarity. The flavoursome timbres of the period wind, from faintly puffy bassoon to deliciously woody flute, are enchantingly heard in Gabriel's avian aria and the gambolling love duet for Adam and Eve. Many of the solo numbers have a chamber-musical intimacy. But except for a smartly paced Sunrise, Antonini and his forces never stint on the oratorio's grandeur. Orchestra and the firm-toned Bavarian choir (with a notably incisive alto line) pack a powerful punch in the big choruses, not least in the thrillingly clinched climax of 'Die Himmel erzählen'. Antonini pushes the tempo of the trio and chorus 'Der Herr ist gross' to the edge of the possible. But it works, with Anna Lucia Richter and Maximilian Schmitt blithely tossing off their coloratura flourishes like trails of angelic laughter.

Soprano and tenor soloists, both fresh and youthful of tone and elegant in style, give pleasure throughout. Richter sings 'Nun beut die Flur' with a natural grace and playful added touches of ornamentation. Schmitt veils his bright lyric tenor in a tender evocation of the first moonrise and the creation of Eve. Florian Boesch's Raphael, baritone rather than bass, is more controversial: a Lieder-singer's detail, vivid imagination, humour in his zoological recitative, yet for my taste too much stabbing at individual notes, as in the serene close of 'Rollend in schäumenden Wellen'; and I wish he hadn't attempted a disgusted-sounding gurgle of a bottom D on 'Gewürm'. Boesch is more convincing as a gentle, sensitive Adam (like Haydn himself, Antonini uses just three soloists). In their love duet he and Richter's smiling Eve sound more than ever like Papageno and Papagena transplanted to Eden.

Competition among similarly scaled and conceived performances in German is formidable. There are invigorating versions from Gardiner (Archiv, 4/97), Harnoncourt (DHM, 5/04), Christie (Virgin/Erato, 2/08), Jacobs (Harmonia Mundi, 11/09), Herreweghe (PHI, 12/15) – I could go on, but won't. Antonini now joins the list. Harnoncourt, with a uniformly first-rate cast, is the most broadly paced, and the most attuned to the mystery and majesty of creation. If Antonini can occasionally be brisk to a fault, he catches as exhilaratingly as anyone both the spirit and the letter of Haydn's unsullied vision.

Richard Wigmore (November 2020)

Purcell

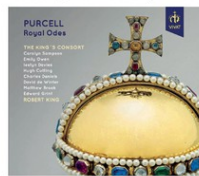
'Royal Odes'

Now does the glorious day appear, Z332.
Welcome, welcome glorious morn, Z338.

Why, why are all the Muses mute?, Z343

The King's Consort / Robert King

Vivat © VIVAT121 (81' • DDD • T)



'Occasional music' – the term sounds as dated as an occasional table.

Perhaps that's why, with the exception of *Come, ye sons of art* and *Welcome to all the pleasures*, Purcell's Odes and Welcome Songs are so comparatively neglected in the recording catalogue. In an age in which unfettered artistic inspiration is all, it's hard to accept the diligent functionality of works designed to serve as much as delight.

And then there are the texts. There's no getting away from the drum-pounding triumphalism of the poetry here in pieces that exhort Britons to 'command the world', exalting King James as 'the glory of earth and the darling of heaven'. But ignore it (as Purcell frequently does) and you can enjoy some of the composer's most attractive, compact settings. As one waggish satirist observed: 'For where the Author's scanty Words have fail'd, / Your happier Graces, *Purcell*, have prevail'd.'

Purcell composed these works throughout his professional life, but the selection here spans the short period from 1685's *Why, why are all the Muses mute?* to *Welcome, welcome glorious morn* from 1691. It's hard to imagine these performances bettered. This is music Robert King and The King's Consort have recorded before, but there's a sheen and poise to these new accounts – crisper, softer-edged, less obviously extrovert – that brings everything into focus.

It helps that King has assembled another crack team of singers who double as soloists and ensemble. The melting sweetness of Iestyn Davies's 'Britain, thou now art great', the voice in an intricate dance in and among the ground bass, is a beguiling foil to Edward Grint's soot-black 'Accursed rebellion' or, later, the rampant testosterone of the duet 'Her hero to whose conduct' by Grint and Matthew Brook. Only tenor Charles Daniels occasionally sounds strained, though still agile through the composer's wriggling tenor arias.

The band is, if anything, even better. From Kati Debretzeni's singing violin to Mark Williams's stylish harpsichord and glorious trumpet-playing from Neil Brough and John Hutchins, this is achingly excellent playing – the opening Symphonies alone would be worth the price of the disc. I only hope King

continues again through the whole set.

Alexandra Coghlan (March 2021)

Smyth

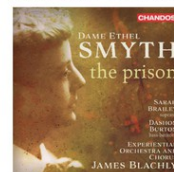
The Prison

Sarah Brailey *sop* Dashon Burton *bass-bar*

Experiential Chorus and Orchestra /

James Blachly

Chandos © CHSA5279 (64' • DDD/DSD • T)



The Prison (1929-30) was Ethel Smyth's last major work, an hour-long oratorio-

style work described by its composer as a symphony, as Elizabeth Woods notes, 'to denote an ancient Greek idea of "concordance" of sweet sounds, not the orchestral genre'. In this beautifully prepared and executed performance, *The Prison* emerges most certainly as a work of sweet sounds and concordance. A symphony it most certainly is not.

The form, however, is beside the point. *The Prison* is cast in two large parts, 'Close on Freedom' and 'The Deliverance', each a touch over half an hour in duration. The text, compiled by Smyth herself, derived from the book *The Prison: A Dialogue* by Smyth's former lover Henry Bennet Brewster (1850-1908). In it, a Prisoner, presumed on the eve of his execution (sung here with a remarkable synthesis of power and beauty by Dashon Burton) engages in a dialogue with his Soul (radiantly sung by Sarah Brailey), amplified by the chorus. Eventually, the Prisoner becomes reconciled to his fate in a trajectory not unlike that of the victim in Othmar Schoeck's extraordinary later song-cycle, *Lebendig begraben*, although in a rather more contemplative manner.

Smyth's haunting music, given here in conductor James Blachly's new edition, is beautifully constructed and highly evocative (with quotes or allusions to earlier Smyth scores). Her orchestration is limpid and masterly, rendered lovingly here by Blachly with the Experiential Orchestra. The choral contribution is relatively minor, the focus rightly on the two soloists, but again superbly performed. The only miscalculation is Smyth's use of 'The Last Post' in the concluding pages, adding a martial resonance that may jar to modern ears; to Smyth, a major-general's daughter, it may just have been an echo of (her) youth which she wanted at this point. Magnificent sound from Chandos, too. Very strongly recommended.

Guy Rickards (September 2020)