

5-1-2001

Seeing Salvation: 1000 Years of Sacred Music

Jeffrey L. Pappas

Marshall University, pappas@marshall.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://mds.marshall.edu/music_faculty



Part of the [Other Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pappas, Jeffrey L., "Seeing salvation: 1000 years of sacred music." *Choral Journal* 41, no. 10 (Spring 2001): 49-50.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Music at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu.

COMPACT DISC REVIEWS

Richard J. Bloesch, editor

San Francisco Girls Chorus

Music from the Venetian Ospedali

Antonio Vivaldi, Gloria in D Major, RV 589; Giovanni Porta, *Pange lingua No. 2*; Nicola Porpora, Magnificat; Francesco Brusa, *Missa pro defunctis* San Francisco Girls' Chorus; Sharon J. Paul, conductor
Recorded March 2-4, 1998; St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, California; San Francisco Girls Chorus, SFGC 9801; [DDD]; 64:42

In their most recent CD release, Sharon J. Paul and the San Francisco Girls' Chorus present professional quality performances of four sacred Baroque works. Two of these pieces, the Vivaldi *Gloria* and the Porpora *Magnificat*, are well-known and readily available. The remaining works, *Pange lingua number 2*, by Giovanni Porta, and the *Missa pro defunctis*, by Francesco Brusa, exist in unpublished manuscript form and have yet to enter the standard repertoire.

All four compositions exist as part of the vast body of treble choral works written in the eighteenth century for the Venetian Ospedali, institutional homes that provided religious and secular education for orphaned, illegitimate, and abandoned children. Girls in the Ospedali were trained in all aspects of music, eventually becoming members of the choir or orchestra. Venice's premiere composers wrote for the Ospedali choirs, which became known throughout Europe for their fine singing traditions. Many works written for the Ospedali girls have never been published in modern editions. They remain a great untapped musical resource of the eighteenth century.

In a musical sense, the San Francisco Girls Chorus is a descendant of the Ospedali, training 325 girls, ages seven to eighteen, in a six-level music education program. On this recording, soloists are chosen from the choir, and a professional period-instrument orchestra accompanies the SFGC ensembles in performances given at baroque pitch. Excellent liner notes and complete English translations of the Latin texts accompany this well

engineered disc.

Many readers may be surprised to hear the Vivaldi *Gloria* performed by a treble choir. According to the notes, this piece

was almost certainly written for the female singers and instrumentalists of the Pietá. These alto singers specialized in low notes, and it is believed they transposed the bass or tenor parts up an octave only occasionally when the ranges became extreme.

It is unclear to this reviewer why there would have been bass or tenor parts if the Gloria had indeed been written for treble voices. Regardless, this recording makes a convincing argument for treble performances of this and other such works that are more commonly heard performed by SATB choirs.

Paul achieves a rich, unified treble sonority and nearly impeccable intonation with her young singers. The maturity of the alto sound is especially impressive. The forty-five eleven- to eighteen-year-olds who comprise Chorissimi, the SFGC's concert and touring ensemble, sound completely at ease in the Vivaldi and Porpora, works they have undoubtedly performed around the world. In the Porta, however, a conservative five-minute work, which uses unison texture as a unifying device, the group seems less comfortable and the blend suffers.

The latest work on this recording, Brusa's 1767 *Missa Pro Defunctis*, is also the most forward-looking. Though rooted in the traditions of High Baroque church music, it displays characteristics of the Classical style, already established by Haydn in Austria. This is a wonderful piece deserving of a serious look by conductors of treble choirs. As the manuscript is not readily available, this disc would be the place to start. The graduates of Chorissimi, who sing in the SFGC's Ospedali Choir, give it a solid reading, exhibiting beautiful vocal colors and a more mature sound than their younger counterparts.

RECORDING COMPANIES THIS ISSUE

Metronome Recordings, Ltd.
Carrick Business Centre
Commercial Road
Penryn, Cornwall TR10 8AR
England

San Francisco Girls Chorus
P.O. Box 15397
San Francisco, CA 94115-0397

The San Francisco Girls' Chorus and their director, Sharon J. Paul, deserve high praise for their excellent work on this recording. Their performances clearly demonstrate why this organization is a world leader in the musical education of young women. How thrilling to hear these talented singers perform with such style and grace!

Jonathan Hirsh

Seeing Salvation: 1000 Years of Sacred Music

Saint Dunstan, Kyrie; Perotin, *Viderunt Omnes*; John Dunstable, *O crux gloriosa*; Guillaume Dufay, *Victimae Paschali*; Loyset Compere, *Asperges Me*; Jacobus Obrecht, *Salve Crux*; Thomas Ashwell, Gloria, *Missa Jesu Christe*; Claudio Monteverdi, *Beatus Vir*; Johann Sebastian Bach, *Singet dem Herrn*; Joseph Haydn, Sanctus from the *Lord Nelson Mass*; Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Ave Verum Corpus*; Charles Stanford, *Beati Quorum Via*; John Tavener, *The Same Yesterday and Forever*

The Lay Clerks of Canterbury Cathedral Choir, David Flood, director; Orlando Consort; Christ Church Cathedral Choir, Oxford, Stephen Darlington, director; Salisbury Cathedral Choir, Richard Seal, director, David Halls, organist; I Fagiolini, Robert Hollingsworth, director; Fiori Musicali Choir and Orchestra, Penelope Rapson, director; St. Paul's Cathedral Choir, John Scott, director

Recorded: various; Issued: 2000
Metronome Recordings Ltd; Met CD

This compact disc is the third in a series of music and art recordings prepared to accompany exhibits at the National Gallery in London. This particular recording was compiled to accompany the millennium exhibition, *Seeing Salvation: The Image of Christ*. All the selections, with the exception of a world-premiere piece by John Tavener, have been previously released by Metronome Recordings,

the distributor of this compact disc.

Although the recording's subtitle implies that 1000 years of sacred music will be surveyed, over half the compositions are from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. There are also some wide gaps within centuries, with the entire nineteenth and twentieth centuries represented by only two compositions. The recording includes some very popular works, such as Claudio Monteverdi's *Beatus Vir*,

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*, and Franz Joseph Haydn's *Sanctus* from the *Lord Nelson Mass*, as well as some not so commonly heard or performed works, such as a Kyrie chant, by Saint Dunstan, and Loyset Compere's *Asperges Me*. As one might expect, with seven different performing groups and numerous recording venues and techniques, there are some inconsistencies in performance and/or recording qualities between various tracks.

Aficionados of straight-tone singing will find this compact disc particularly appealing, as will those fond of the English Cathedral tradition. Five of the more famous cathedral choirs of England perform selections on this recording. The Salisbury Cathedral Choir's performance of Stanford's *Beati Quorum Via* is one of the best.

With the exception of the Stanford and the premiere of John Tavener's *The Same Yesterday and Forever*, the early works (pre-sixteenth century) tend to get better readings than their later counterparts. The only exception is the very rigid performance of the Saint Dunstan chant. Among the highlights of these works are the five tracks by the Orlando Consort. Singing compositions ranging from Perotin's *Viderunt Omnes* to Obrecht's *Salve Crux*, they display a great sense of style and artistic depth.

Tavener's work, commissioned specifically for the millennium as the theme music for the BBC2 four-part television series *Seeing Salvation*, seems out of place with other pieces on this recording, primarily due to its extended harmonies. Nevertheless, it is a hauntingly beautiful composition. The performance by St. Paul's Cathedral Choir is first-rate, especially in bringing out the expressivity of this short piece (1'09") and the beauty of its sweeping melodic line.

Those hoping that this compact disc would be a comprehensive collection of sacred music over 1000 years might be disappointed. In reality, that would be a daunting task for any record company. For those looking to add some depth to a collection short on early music, or some of the later "standards," this recording merits consideration.

Jeffrey Pappas

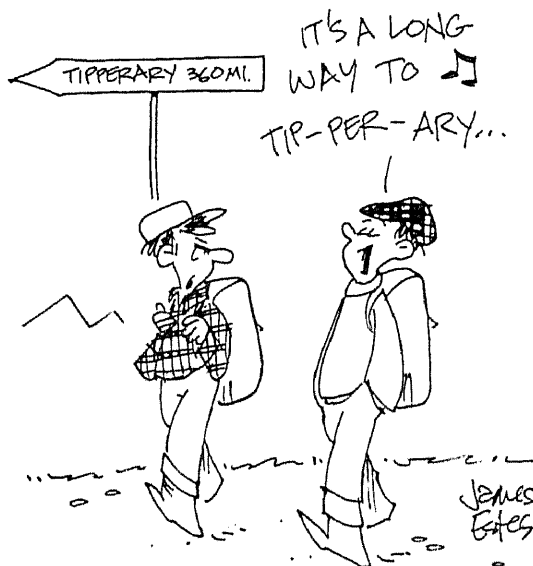
Harmonize throughout Europe without skipping a beat!

Like a well-balanced choir, Witte Travel's team of travel professionals and concert organizers work in harmony to take care of every detail of your group's touring and performance needs.



Custom-designed tours for performing groups
traveling in Europe

Call (800) 469-4883
E-mail: janel@wittetravel.com
3250 28th Street S.E. • Grand Rapids, MI 49512



" I CAN SEE THE SIGNS - I KNOW IT'S A LONG WAY!"