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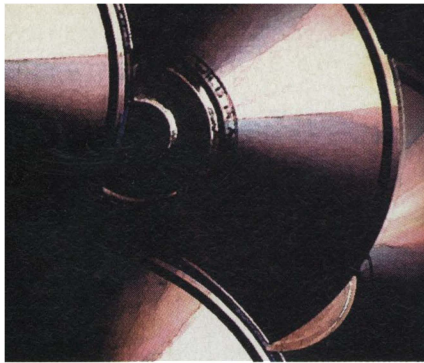
Review of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Christus, Kirchenwerke III*, Kammerchor 2004 Stuttgart, Bamberger Symphoniker, Frieder Bernius, conductor. Carus-Verlag, 1987.

Vicki Stroehler

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Compact Disc Reviews

David Castleberry, editor <castlebe@marshall.edu>

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy:
Christus, Kirchenwerke III
Kammerchor Stuttgart, Bamberger Symphoniker
Frieder Bernius, conductor
1987 Carus-Verlag, Carus 83.105 66'57"

CARUS-VERLAG, Frieder Bernius, and the Stuttgarter Kammerchor have produced a number of impressive recordings to serve as companions to their impeccable printed editions of valuable, but seldom performed, choral works. Mendelssohn's music has been championed in at least six of these recordings, and showcases an undeniably rich output that until now has received scant attention. The present disc aims to reverse that fortune. *Christus* features three early works from 1822 to 1825, when the composer was just thirteen to sixteen years old, along with late works from 1843 and 1847. Even the earliest of these works provides evidence of Mendelssohn's craft and affirms his music's place in the active choral repertoire.

The *Kyrie in d minor* from 1825 is monumental in scope and leaves the listener wishing he had completed the remaining movements. The liner notes identify J.S. Bach as the primary influence, but Mozart of the *Requiem* is surely present, as well. Perhaps it is Bernius's shaping of melodic and inner voices that conjures this spectre, or his control of the piece's emotional highs. The bass line does recall Bach, but woodwind colors are Classical in concept and foreshadow the pilgrimage movement of the *Italian Symphony*. Fugal writing abounds but again it is Mozart, rather than Bach, that comes to mind. Bernius highlights the work's late-Classical-early-Romantic status, letting the music unfold naturally, but in a tempo that never becomes excessively lush or self-indulgent. He maintains careful dynamic control, pushing

choir and orchestra to expressive highs through the arching melodies while maintaining rhythmic excitement even in the softest passages. Textures remain transparent so that soloistic lines in the chorus and orchestra come through clearly at all times.

The focus of the recording is the unfinished oratorio *Christus* (1847), conceived as a triptych together with *St. Paul* and *Elijah*. Three sections were planned, dealing with Christ's birth, passion, and resurrection. Had the work been finished, it might have rivaled the other two in length. As it is, only small portions of the

first two sections were sketched out before Mendelssohn's untimely death. Completed portions resemble *Elijah*, which dates from the previous year. The extant chorus of part one, "Es wird ein Stern aus Jacob aufgehen," aligns closely with "He watching over Israel," and matches it ably in melodic gesture and overall design. The ensuing four-part chorale setting, "Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern," has obvious roots in Bach, but with Classical orchestral scoring. Mendelssohn did realize a larger portion of the work's second part, including the entire exchange between Pontius Pilate and the angry crowd.

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This material presents greater dramatic possibilities and affords further evidence of his choral expertise. Here, as elsewhere, the direction is superb, delicately controlled and exquisitely balanced. The composer's repetitions never cause things to bog down, but are shifted subtly to become part of the music's forward motion. Only the soprano's recitative in the first part disappoints, lacking the strength of delivery and rhythmic drive of the tenor's successful treatment in the second part.

The remainder of the recording is given over to shorter works: *Jube Domine* (1822), *Drei Psalmen* (1843-44), and the early motet *Jesus, meine Zuversicht* (1824). Bernius reveals the best aspects of

Mendelssohn in each of these; specifically, his ability to blend elements of Bach together with the Romantic tradition as heard in Schubert. The singers vary their tone quality to emphasize dissonance and harmonic richness, and never falter in control or tuning. The shorter works also offer different faces of Mendelssohn, of which two pieces deserve special mention. The second of the three Psalms, *Der 43. Psalm, Richt' mich, Gott*, is interesting for its alternation of chant-like unison lines in the men's voices with the women's harmonized response, which leads inevitably to the beautifully arching melodic lines of the full chorus. Mendelssohn has set the third of the psalms, *Der 22. Psalm, Mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen*, dramatically, with a solo tenor employing a dark, modal melody that Bernius highlights with quietude.

The fugal "Alleluia" of the motet, *Jesus, meine Zuversicht* (1824), provides a brilliant ending to this equally stellar recording. Mr. Bernius and his performers capture Mendelssohn's musical gesture

with conviction and deep understanding, conveying his Romantic tendencies without inappropriate heaviness. Each hearing offers something new. The clarity and understanding that Bernius and the Stuttgarter Kammerchor bring to this music may be without equal.

Vicki Stroeber,
Huntington, WV

Monteverdi: *Madrigali guerrieri ed amorosi*

Concerto Vocale

Rene Jacobs, conductor

2002 harmonia mundi 901736.37

Mas de Vert, F-13200 Arles

2 hours 35' 55 "

CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI'S *Eighth Book* of madrigals was printed in Venice in 1638, when the composer was seventy-one years of age. At this point in his life, he had been in charge of music at Saint Mark's basilica, probably Italy's most conspicuous appointment in sacred music, for twenty-five years. These responsibilities may account, in part, for the relative absence of new works from him during this period—his *Scherzi musicali in Stilo recitativo*, 1632, was his only publication between the *Seventh Book* of madrigals of 1619 and the *Eighth Book*. Appearing at such a late point and encompassing so much of Monteverdi's craft, this mammoth collection may be regarded reasonably as both explication and culmination of the materials and ethos of the early Baroque. *Madrigali guerrieri ed amorosi* [Madrigals of Love and War] provides an overview of Monteverdi's work and contains examples from virtually every secular form and style Monteverdi explored:

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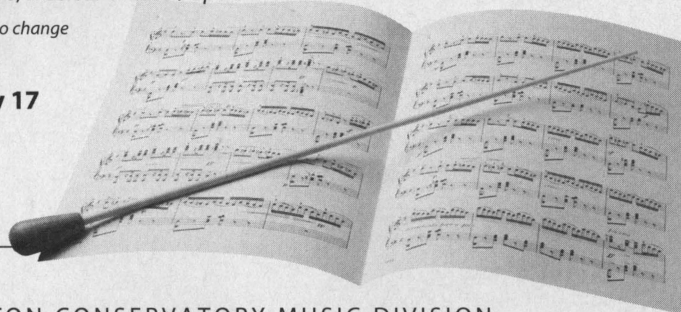
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