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**Review of Trio Mediaeval, *Soir, dit-elle*, ECM Records 2004 and
Words of the Angel, ECM Records 2001**

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Compact Disc Reviews

David Castleberry, editor <castlebe@marshall.edu>

Words of the Angel

Trio Mediaeval

ECM New Series 1753; 289 461 782-2

2001 ECM Records GmbH

65:45

Soir, dit-elle

Trio Mediaeval

ECM New Series 1869; 80001847-02

2004 ECM Records GmbH

65:56

THIS PAIR OF DISCS by Trio Mediaeval offers an imaginative soundscape of music both ancient and new. Trio Mediaeval's approach to the ancient is laudable and lovely, but the contemporary compositions written specifically for this all female group seem to give them their truest voice.

The older recording, *Words of the Angel* (2001), intersperses movements of the Tournai mass—one of the earliest manuscript compilations of polyphonic settings of the texts of the Ordinary—among monophonic laudae and English Marian motets and sequences. The various styles provide textural and harmonic relief, a real concern in a completely unaccompanied recording. The recording takes its name from the one contemporary composition, a 1998 work by Ivan Moody, composed for the group. This work, appearing near the end of the disc, is a harbinger of the marvelous things to come in the second recording.

The newer recording, *Soir, dit-elle* (2004), follows the same format as the earlier by interspersing movements from Lionel Power's *Missa 'Alma Redemptoris Mater'* among monophonic laudae and other polyphonic compositions. However, the monophonic laudae and polyphony date not from the Middle Ages but the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The result is a heady juxtaposition of the sweetness of the *countenance anglaise*

with the more dissonant styles of these neo-Medieval works.

Listening to the newer recording first may have been a mistake. Judgment of the older is undoubtedly clouded by the experience afforded by the newer: purity of sound, sureness of pitch – particularly in the dissonant patches, intriguing vocal timbres, and exquisite ensemble that characterize the group's performance of the contemporary works. Then, there are the compositions themselves. While some might dismiss their obvious imitations of chant, Notre Dame and Ars Nova styles, the composers have, nonetheless, brought a sensibility and vocabulary that could only arise from a post-modern outlook. This retrenchment seems *apropos* of a world beset by tragedy and war, desperately in search of meaning. After experiencing such, it is difficult to hear the early music of the first disc with anything other than modern ears. The second disc

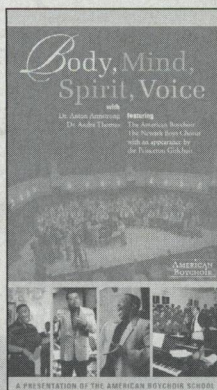
eclipses the first in emotion, performance and surety of "voice."

The new works—by Ukrainian composer Oleh Harkavyy, and British composers Gavin Bryars, Andrew Smith and Ivan Moody (represented on both discs)—are hauntingly beautiful and Trio Mediaeval's performance of them stunning. In the polyphonic works, the group's voices engage an otherworldly means of expression. The monophonic laudae (by Bryars) feature the range of timbres in each of the women's solo voices. Special mention must be made of Torunn Østrem Ossum's extraordinary work in Bryars's *Laude novella*, for which she creates a timbral antiphony between refrain and verse.

Certainly the same qualities that the group and individuals display in the new compositions on both discs are present in their performances of the early works. The voices are simply beautiful, and the

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performers bring to the texts a stillness that belies a deep understanding of the original function of the works. Their voices are not earthbound, but soar toward heaven to communicate with the Divine.

This is to add one more voice to the apparently long list of reviewers who find the lack of translations for the Latin (and even the Latin for the masses) in the liner notes unconscionable. John Potter's protestations notwithstanding [see

<www.ecmrecords.com> for his response to the uproar], all of the works are (and were) about the texts. The texts give the works their contexts, both new and old. Even if the singers are bringing new meanings to the works, each *listener* will bring different experiences to the same, and thus deserve to have all the resources before them.

While the lack of text translations is a shortcoming, it is ultimately a small one in the face of such an engaging group as Trio Mediaeval. I highly recommend both discs for any library or collection, and hope that there are more to come from this ensemble.

Vicki Strocher
Huntington, WV

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