5-2003

Review of Benjamin Britten, *Sacred and Profane, AMDG, Five Flower Songs, Old French Carol, Choral Dances From Gloriana*, Polyphony, Stephen Layton, conductor. Hyperion, 2000

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Benjamin Britten
Sacred And Profane • A.M.D.G. Five Flower Songs • Old French Carol Choral Dances From Gloriana
Polyphony, Stephen Layton, conductor
Recorded in Temple Church, London, on October 6, 1999 and April 26 and 27, 2000 Hyperion: CDA67140, DDD, 61'26

Editor's Note: Dr. Vicki Stroeher expands upon the typical review format in this discussion of *Sacred And Profane,* drawing upon her extensive dissertation research for "Form and Meaning in Benjamin Britten's *Sonnet Cycles,*" along with materials assembled for publications and through her residency at the Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh, England. By linking relevant background information with performance considerations of selected works, she provides insights meaningful to listeners and conductors preparing these works for performance.

The choral works of English composer Benjamin Britten (1913-76), like his efforts in other forms, have been overshadowed by his operas.[1] *War Requiem,* essentially operatic in character, along with *Rejoice in the Lamb,* and *A Ceremony of Carols,* have risen to the top of the choral repertoire and receive the majority of the attention paid today as concert and recording fare. These, however, obscure a number of other excellent works in Britten's choral output. *Sacred and Profane,* a release by Stephen Layton and Polyphony, provides a useful glimpse at some of Britten's lesser known works for mixed chorus, including previously unpublished (and even discarded) juvenilia.[2] The recording spans Britten's career with works from his school days, his prime, and his final choral offering, and takes listeners on a chronological journey through the composer's development and maturity.

Britten's choral works were composed most often to fulfill commissions, either from church choirs or individuals, or in the commemoration of specific occasions. The *Five Flower Songs* (1950), the first selections on the current disc, are a case in point. Britten composed these pieces to honor Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst, contributors to Britten's English Opera Group, on the occasion of their silver wedding anniversary. The texts were chosen to celebrate the Elmhirsts's fondness for botany.[3] A student choir directed by Imogen Holst, daughter of Gustav Holst and a tireless employee of Britten, premiered the work outdoors on July 23, 1950. Britten almost certainly knew of the outdoor arrangements and the inherent difficulties they would present, and the potential limitations of the student vocalists. Accustomed to writing under a variety of constraints, however, Britten produced some of his most important works in just this way.[4] *Five Flower Songs* captures at once the essence of English part song, the flexibility of young voices, and the joy of singing beautiful, poignant melodies and rollicking ballads. Each setting is wholly fitting to its subject and sensibility.

The cycle gathers poems from seemingly random although wholly English pens, from Robert Herrick to George Crabbe to John Clare, to an anonymous writer of a near bawdy song. For their settings, Britten employs a variety of styles and techniques, including two-part counterpoint, *fugato,* word painting, and wist-

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ful, angular melodies.

To make this group cohere, requires an understanding of the sheer individuality of each offering. Stephen Layton and Polyphony succeed admirably on this count, bringing to the work a maturity that belies the student performance origins. The singers capture the richness of sound that is the "Succession of the Four Sweet Months" and turn "Marsh Flowers" into a poignant sonic event, with precise diction and a jarring rhythmic energy that heightens Britten's dissonances. The "Ballad of Green Broom," unfortunately, suffers under the weight of this same maturity. Rather than conveying delight in Britten's text setting, the "strumming" of the guitar and the tolling of wedding bells on "green broom," this reading falls flat. The beginning is so slow that it never gains the momentum necessary for its bacchanalian finish. Indeed, the score dictates an *accelerando*—which some have interpreted to mean execute as fast as possible—but this performance barely increases in speed.[5] Too studied and controlled, it lacks rhythmic drive and displays a curious lack of clarity when acceleration does occur.

The second work on this recording, *A. M. D. G.*, would have never been heard in public, were it not for the efforts of Colin Matthews, Donald Mitchell and Faber Music. In August 1939, while living in the United States, Britten wrote the piece for Peter Pears's "Round Table Singers." The intended performance did not take place and Britten never made a fair copy of his sketch for publication purposes. He later abandoned the work altogether, and in 1976 assigned its intended opus number (17) to a revision of his American opera Paul Bunyan. Whether due to intense self-criticism, as Mervyn Cooke suggests in the recording notes, the cancellation of its performance, or simply because Britten got caught up in other works, notably *Peter Grimes,* the work was buried. Enter Colin Matthews, who has prepared many of Britten's abandoned works for performance and publication. Through his efforts, the work received its premiere on August 22, 1984, during the Aldeburgh Festival at The Maltings, Snape by the London Sinfonietta Chorus, and was subsequently edited by Colin Matthews and published by Faber (1989). It has received a few performances and recordings since and seems, at least for a while, to enjoy its renaissance.

Although the poems for *A. M. D. G.* all stem from the hand of Gerard Manley Hopkins they, like *Flower Songs,* could not be more diverse. From the meditative "Rosa Mystica" to the emotive love song "O Deus, ego amo te," to "The Soldier," Britten's eclectic tendencies in text choice shine through, as does his ability to give each poem individuality within a coherent whole. Particularly striking in this recording are the performances of "Prayer I" with its dissonant clashes, "Rosa

Mystica" with its rosary-like chant below the meditator's wandering, but relevant, thoughts and "The Soldier," which Britten set aptly as a march. Polyphony is persuasive in conveying these defining elements. The use of straight tone in the soprano in "Prayer I" allows the Brittenesque dissonances to cut through effectively. Likewise, their precision in "The Soldier" underscores the jaunty rhythms of Britten's march. The group's rendition of "Rosa Mystica" stands out for its clarity of diction and rhythm, and for its interpretative insights. The "chanters" provide a distance that suggests meditation and leaves the glossing above it floating as though spontaneous.

Two of Britten's smaller settings are *The Hymn to the Virgin* (1930) and the *Chorale after an Old French Carol* (1944). Britten wrote *The Hymn to the Virgin* in a matter of hours at the age of 16, while still in preparatory school, just prior to his entering the Royal College of Music.[6] The work received its premiere by the Lowestoft Music Society (Britten's hometown) on January 5, 1931, and the composer revised it at the ripe old age of 21. Though there is some naivety and simplicity in the melodic writing, the work still displays Britten's incredible sense of text and style. Britten's writing sometimes seems inevitable in that, once one has heard his setting of a text phrase, no other seems possible. Even in this early work, Britten achieves great effect with minimal melodic material. A reviewer of the first performance commented, "The music of the composition was tuneful and pleasing, with a refined delicacy which demands careful treatment."[7] There are no special technical difficulties in the work, but it does demand exactness, particularly in the balance of the two choruses. Britten used antiphonal SATB chorus and

semi-chorus to set the text couplets—one line English, the subsequent line Latin. This intentional imbalance of the two groups creates an echo effect, in spite of which the semi-chorus must match the full chorus in blend and tone. Layton and Polyphony capture this Britten-ism perfectly.

Chorale after an Old French Carol, for eight-part chorus, is one of the most harmonically rich works Britten ever wrote, with emotionally tinged chords and progressions that resemble those of Arvö Pärt, but that predate the Estonian's work by some forty years. The *Chorale* was written in 1944 for a Christmas eve BBC production, *The Poet's Christmas,*[8] and treats W. H. Auden's text with unusual subtlety, avoiding Britten's characteristic rhythms and jarring dissonances. With the resonance the Temple Church affords and the clarity that Polyphony brings to these pieces, the performances are hauntingly beautiful.

The "Choral Dances" from *Gloriana,* framed by the two shorter works mentioned above, hold a secure place in the choral repertoire. Britten conceived these works as integral to *Gloriana,* an opera he wrote in celebration of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation (1953). Act II, Scene 1 has Elizabeth I watching a masque put on in her honor by the people of Norwich. As Humphrey Carpenter has noted, the allegorical characters, Time and his wife Concord, represent what Elizabeth I accomplished in Act I—peace—and what makes her vulnerable in Act III—the passing of time.[9] The first performance of the opera was received politely, but not overly enthusiastically, and certainly with none of the acclaim accorded *Billy Budd* less than two years earlier. In addition to the work's being criticized as "inharmonious and wearisome," it seems that the aging of Elizabeth I in Act III, among other things, was perceived as ". . . profoundly affronting the glorious memory of Queen Elizabeth I, [and] hence unsuitable for public performance before the Queen Elizabeth II."[10] Britten dropped the choral dances from future performances, but published them separately in their unaccompanied form and later made an arrangement that included tenor solo and harp. Polyphony's performance is lively, if a bit rushed, in the "Dance of Concord," but is marked by lovely moments. The sopranos are a bit shrill, particularly in "Country Girls."

With Britten's final choral work, *Sacred and Profane,* comes the culmination of his choral writing. He wrote the work between December 1974 and February 1975, amid numerous disabilities that accompanied his ongoing heart problems. Following an operation in May 1973, Britten's health deteriorated steadily until his death on December 4, 1976. Despite being somewhat disabled by a small stroke that affected his right hand and arm, Britten maintained a tight and persistent composing schedule. The work ends, interestingly, with a description of the body's breakdown before death.

Britten conceived *Sacred and Profane* for Peter Pears's group of five soloists, the Wilbye Consort, who gave the first performance at The Maltings in Snape, in September 1975. Britten was at his best

when writing for voices he knew, as in any of his solo settings for Peter Pears. He knew the capabilities of these singers and wrote accordingly, with complex harmonies and melodic lines that required great flexibility and dexterity. It has been written that "Britten's meticulous craftsmanship is of the kind whose greatest art is to conceal art."[11] Although the demands of this work for listeners and performers may suggest a wealth of material, it is actually an economy of material that Britten manipulates to great effect. This quality brings his art full circle. From the 1930 *Hymn to the Virgin,* to the 1975 *Sacred and Profane,* Britten created much with little.

The virtuosic demands of *Sacred and Profane* are met admirably by Polyphony. Although their performance of the *Chorale* seems on first hearing to be the most outstanding, it is surpassed by *Sacred and Profane.* The group's greatest achievement is their demonstration that the work can be performed well by a chorus, not just by a group of soloists. Their transparent texture provides clarity essential to the performance. Particularly memorable are "Yif Ic of Love Can" and "Ye that Pasen by," both of which are marked by strident harmonies. Soprano soloist, Cecilia Osmond, deserves special mention for her ethereal solo in the former.

This recording has much to offer: clarity, enviable diction, and credible, often enlightening performances of works that should, and hopefully will, be heard more frequently.

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James Adler
Memento Mori: An AIDS Requiem
Requiem aetemam; Dies irae; Yizkor (Remembrance); The Wounded (Ingemisco); Lacrymosa; Santus • Holy • Kadosh; Pie Jesu; Lux aeternq; Survival
Victoria Livengood, mezzo soprano; Jane Dutton, soprano; M‡ire O'Brien, soprano; Steve Huffines, baritone; Neil Farrell, tenor
AmorArtis Chorale and Orchestra
Johannes Somary, conductor
CD Troy 463, 75'35"
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915 Broadway, Albany, NY 12207

Those familiar with Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize winning *Angels in America* will note interesting commonalities with the kaleidoscopic perspective brought to the topic of AIDS in James Adler's *Memento Mori: An AIDS Requiem.* The work, scored for soloists, men's chorus, and orchestra, interweaves texts from a variety of sources, including portions of the liturgical Latin Requiem mass, traditional texts in English and Hebrew, and original texts by Quentin Crisp, Philip Justin Smith, Denise Stokes, and Bill Weaver. Approximately seventy-five minutes in length, *Memento Mori* is an ambitious and passionate work dedicated to those who have battled AIDS.

This premiere recording features a distinguished group of soloists, the chorus and orchestra of AmorArtis, and Johannes Somary, conductor, who led the work's chamber version premiere in New York City in April of 2000. Maestro Somary is well-known for his many recordings with AmorArtis, including four Stereo Review Record-of-the-Year Awards.

The work is varied in texture and color and accommodates the diverse influences of its texts with sensitivity and idiomatic understanding. *"Yizkor"* [Remembrance], which replaces the Latin *Recordare,* is sung in Hebrew by baritone Steve Huffines, while the chorus intones the composer's adapted English text beneath. The light scoring of this movement, flute, piano, and double-bass, demonstrates the primary text found throughout *Momento Miori* and frees the performers to treat the soloistic strands of texture with considerable nuance. Likewise, the musical underlay for the spoken narrative of the fifth movement supports without disrupting, and allows Huffines to communicate powerfully in grief-stricken utterance.

Vocal solo performances are strong throughout. Particularly noteworthy are the contributions of Victoria Livengood, whose opulent *mezzo* soprano voice brings warmth, musical sensitivity, and impeccable diction to three of the work's nine