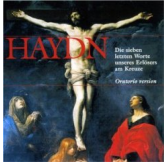


J. Haydn - The Seven Last Words of Christ (Nicol Matt)

Written by bluesever

Friday, 29 March 2013 17:39 -

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1. *Introduzione I* 2. *No. 1 – Vater, vergib ihnen* 3. *No. 2 – Fürwahr, ich sag'es dir* 4. *No. 3 – Frau, hier siehe deinen Sohn* 5. *No. 4 – Mein gott, mein Gott* 6. *Introduzione II* 7. *No. 5 – Jesus rufet* 8. *No. 6 – Es ist vollbracht* 9. *No. 7 – Vater, in deine Hände* 10. *Il Terremoto (Das Erdbeben)* Petra Labitzke, soprano Gabriele Wunderer, alto Daniel Sans, tenor Christof, Fischesser, bass Nordic Chamber Choir Kurpfälzisches Kammerorchester Nicol Matt – conductor *Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze, H. XX/2 (1786)* Recorded at Hotel Wartburg, Mannheim, January 2002

Haydn's "The Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross" has had a bountiful history in terms of arrangements. Originally composed as an orchestral work in 1786, Haydn subsequently made a string quartet arrangement, solo keyboard arrangement and an oratorio version for vocal soloists, chorus, and orchestra.

Haydn caught the idea for an oratorio when in 1794 he heard a vocal transcription of the work in Passau on the Danube. Haydn set to work on a vocal arrangement, making great changes to the vocal parts he heard in Passau. Eventually, this oratorio version became more popular than the original one for orchestra and was published in 1801.

In current times, the only version rarely heard is the one for solo keyboard, the other three getting fine receptions from classical music enthusiasts. Which arrangement is best? Well, I'm not going to tackle that issue and will simply state that the inclusion of vocalists when setting music to a religious subject is a time-honored tradition.

Irrespective of the arrangement, "The Seven Last Words" is a very serious piece of music as

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the title clearly reveals. I know a few Haydn fans who don't care for the work in any form, considering it too negative and severe with a limited range of tempi (all slow). I do wonder if they have taken sufficient time to really dig into the music, because it presents a classic case of the cycle of sin, remorse, and redemption. There is surely an uplifting element to the work that creates subtle contrasts with the despair often possessed by Jesus and his followers.

The 2nd Movement is a fine example of Haydn's ability to provide uplifting and glorious music. Paced luxuriously and with comfort, Haydn alternates solo and choral singing with perfection. The text's subject revolves around the Lord's forgiveness of sinners, and the music fully reflects the road from sin to redemption through faith and enlightenment. Although Haydn's contrasts are quite subtle, they carry a strong message.

Unlike the other arrangements, Haydn's oratorio version has a 2nd Introduction that is a gem. Set imaginatively for solo wind-band, the music alternates in offering comfort and despair. The instrumentation is a great stroke on Haydn's part in providing heightened contrast and a distinctive separation between the work's two parts. I've been listening to "The Seven Last Words" for many years and am still surprised when I hear the wind-band.

Given that Jesus' time on earth is nearing its end, the overt drama and urgency of the music increases in Part II. "It is finished" marks the basic theme of the 8th Movement, as the population keeps switching back and forth from the horror of the situation to the prospect of eternal salvation. Haydn gives us a very clear idea of the contrast in thinking by starting in the traditional 'death key' of G minor and then using the key of G major to reflect the optimism of Jesus' followers. In the 9th Movement, Haydn uses the calming key of E flat major to convey Jesus' last moments.

The work's finale is an earthquake upon the death of Jesus – "He has departed. The depths of the earth resound. Tremble, Golgotha, tremble!". Haydn's use of severe chromaticism and the savage blows of the orchestra do the trick in summoning up the image of a cataclysmic event. This is program music at its best and most descriptive.

Brilliant Classics, in releasing a new recording of "The Seven Last Words" in oratorio form, comes into direct competition with the fine recording by Nikolaus Harnoncourt with the Arnold Schoenberg Choir and the Concentus musicus Wien. The Harnoncourt also has well known vocal soloists headed by Anthony Rolfe-Johnson and Robert Holl, while Matt's version has singers of little reputation.

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One area where Brilliant Classics does not succeed concerns the matter of language texts. The text is only provided in German, while the liner notes on Teldec also give us English and French. The odd thing about the Brilliant Classics liner notes is that the short biographies for Nicol Matt and the Nordic Chamber Choir are exclusively in English, but the notes for the orchestra are only in German. The mental processing seems random at best.

Fortunately, the performance of Matt and his forces represents a major improvement on the booklet notes. Actually, this is an excellent and idiomatic version that can be claimed for just a fraction of the cost of a premium priced disc. Harnoncourt's Arnold Schoenberg Choir and vocal soloists certainly have the advantage of pure beauty of tone and blending of voices with instruments. Surprisingly, Harnoncourt's production is also more polished than Matt's is, and Harnoncourt consistently employs slower tempos.

Yet, there are movements such as the 2nd where Matt is clearly more emotionally invested than Harnoncourt. Also, Matt's singers are easily a match for Harnoncourt's regarding emotive abilities, and the earthquake conveys greater desperation in Matt's hands. The sole reservation I have about the performance is that the vocal soloists sometimes overwhelm the instrumental contributions such as in the 3rd Movement where the soloists are projected well beyond the reticent orchestra.

Although the Brilliant Classics version is a little rough around the edges, it fully conveys the music's text and Haydn's incisive settings. There aren't many oratorio versions of "The Seven Last Words" in the catalogue, and I can't think of any reason not to add this new performance to one's Haydn music library. Once again, Brilliant Classics has enriched our world of recordings, and Naxos would be wise to pay close attention to this new and potent competitor. --- Don Satz, musicweb-international.com

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