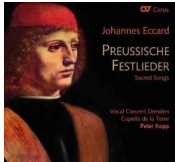


**Johannes Eccard, Johannes Stobæus - Preussische Festlieder (2011)**



01 Johannes Stobæus: Macht hoch die Tur 03:29 02 Johannes Stobæus: Such, wer da will, ein ander Ziel 04:36 03 Johannes Eccard: O Freude über Freud 03:56 04 Johannes Stobæus: Wes ist der Stern 04:36 05 Johannes Eccard: Maria, das Jungfrauelein 05:29 06 Johannes Eccard: Freu dich, du werthe Christenheit 03:22 07 Johannes Eccard: Mein Sund mich krank 11:21 08 Johannes Eccard: Zu dieser osterlichen Zeit 01:43 09 Johannes Eccard: Freut euch, ihr Christen alle 02:20 10 Johannes Eccard: Der heilig Geist vom Himmel kam 03:40 11 Johannes Eccard: Mir ist ein geistlichs Kirchelein 04:11 12 Johannes Eccard: Der Zacharias ganz verstummt 04:53 13 Johannes Eccard: Ubers Gebirg Maria geht 05:03 14 Johannes Stobæus: Gott einen hellen Wunderstern 03:44 15 Johannes Eccard: Mein schonste Zier und Kleinod bist 04:14 Vocal Concert Dresden Capella de la Torre Peter Kopp – conductor

The CD cover is actually a little misleading. As well as the Leonardo portrait often said to be of a musician the only composer listed is Johannes Eccard, whereas four of the tracks are devoted to his pupil Johannes Stobaeus. Stobaeus, a generation older, was a new name for me. He was responsible for the publication of sixty-one hymns and 'Festal songs' some thirty and more years after his master's death. His style is often more ornate, more reminiscent of Gabrieli especially in its instrumental ornamentation. This however is never over-intrusive. Listen to Gott einen hellen Wunderstern written, somewhat improbably, for the 'Thanksgiving of the Augsburg Confession' in 1630.

I must also confess, because I am, what my son calls, a little sad, to have been wondering about Eccard. He was a pupil of Lassus by the way. I wondered whether any of his music would materialise during this, the quincentenary of his death - actually in January 2011. So at last some recognition has been made and in delightful and thoughtful performances.

The publication referred to above was Preussische Festlieder. It appeared in both 1642 and

1661 and comprises 61 hymns in five, six, seven or eight parts. These are arranged in accordance with the church year. Peter Kapp's choice reflects just that, beginning on the first Sunday in Advent ( Lift up your heads you mighty gates) through Christmas, Epiphany, via Easter to Pentecost. Also included is Eccard's ' Gott einen hellen Windertern' (God long ago lit a bright miraculous star) written for a thanksgiving on the centenary of the Augsburg Confession in 1630. Consequently these pieces encompass a wide range of moods. These range from the joyous Easter hymn ( Zu dieser osterlichen) contrasting with the sombre, and lengthy, rather archaic and motet-like Mein Sund mich kränkt written for Holy week and Freu dich, du wertr Christenhalt a warm and yet thoughtful hymn for the Annunciation.

For UK singers, the four strophes of Maria, das Jungfräulein will be best known as it is often wheeled out at Evensong around 2 February for the Feast of the Purification Candle Mass. It is known as 'When to the temple Mary went'. It is typical of his style of restraint, dignity and concision.

Another attractive aspect of the performances can be heard in the Ascension hymn Freut euch, ihr Christen alle. There are just two verses but in between there is an instrumental episode with discreet ornamentation in the cornetto part. In addition the first verse is sung by unison female voices and the second by unison male. As one works through the CD there is therefore a wide variety in colour, tempo and instrumentation. Der Zacharias ganz verstummt, a hymn for the feast of St. John the Baptist, has four verses with no change of instrumentation or dynamic. This which might grate on you after a while but one must remember that this is primarily liturgical music. The next track begins with wind only before the voices emerge.

The essay in the booklet has been translated in a somewhat odd fashion but the beautiful texts are attractively done. It seems that they were written by Paul Gerhard but adapted by Carl von Winterfled in the 1840s. It was he who rediscovered Eccard, calling him the 'Protestant Palestrina'.

Don't get thinking that these hymns are boringly foursquare and consistently homophonic. True, the melodies are simple and folk-like. True, last lines are often repeated like the choruses of a Victorian Moody & Sankey hymn but some of these are quite memorable. An example is the catchy declamation of 'Das sei ja, das sei jah' in the Whitsuntide hymn ' Der helig geist vom Himmel hoch'. So these pieces are 'music' and although suitable for congregational use can be enjoyed in these more sophisticated versions.

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The instrumental contributions are is not just for choral support. They vary a little from piece to piece and often function as instrumental verses. Sometimes instruments will accompany a single voice on the lower or surrounding parts.

Although I am struggling to think of Eccard as a Palestrina-clone these pieces do have a spirituality of their own which can be quite captivating in small doses. This is not a reflection on the performers. They evidently understand the style, have ideal intonation and clear diction with immaculate instrumental support.

For its period and for its aims the music works well. -- Gary Higginson, MusicWeb International

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