

## Mantovani and His Orchestra - Songs of Praise (1961/2014)

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1. *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* 2. *Whispering Hope* 3. *Nearer My God to Thee* 4. *The Lord's My Shepherd* 5. *Abide with Me* 6. *Onward Christian Soldiers* 7. *The Holy City* 8. *Eternal Father Strong to Save* 9. *Beautiful Isle of Somewhere* 10. *Jesu, Lover of My Soul* 11. *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* 12. *Little Brown Church in the Vale* 13. *All People That on Earth do Dwell* 14. *Rock of Ages*

Mantovani, the undisputed King of light orchestral music, makes yet another appearance on Vocalion, this time with his 1961 Decca album *Songs of Praise*. In partnership with his regular arranger, Cecil Milner, Mantovani produces rich, spellbinding orchestral renditions of hymns such as *Nearer my God to Thee*, *The Holy City*, *Abide with Me* and *The Lord's My Shepherd* among others. Also included is *Rock of Ages*, which originally only appeared in the American version of the album. For some of the hymns, the Sammes Chorus accompanies Mantovani's orchestra, adding a further to dimension to what is a characteristically gorgeous Mantovani album. ---amazon.com

The bizarreness starts with the very fact of Mantovani, the master of British easy listening music (or, as it's called there, light music), doing an album of hymns at the height of his career. Mantovani was completely oriented toward instrumental music, and in 1961 he would seem to have had little to gain by recording tunes that were primarily vehicles for verbal religious sentiments. Things get deeper and stranger with the selection of material, centered almost exclusively on popular hymns, many of them American. Where did the Italian-born Mantovani hear, say, *Beautiful Isle of Somewhere*, composed in Indianapolis in 1897 by Jessie B. Pounds and John Fearis? *Rock of Ages*, that most quintessentially American hymn, was not even included on the British release of the album, but it has been restored in this reissue by Britain's

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Dutton Vocalion label. Little Brown Church in the Vale, with its square rhythms, would seem difficult to translate into the cascading strings of the Mantovani idiom. But the strangest thing of all is that the arrangements, many by the indefatigable Cecil Milner and the rest by Mantovani himself, not only, work but work beautifully. Each piece works a little differently, but broadly speaking what they do is write counterpoints that set up big contrasts with the tunes themselves. Sometimes the tune is almost unrecognizable until it appears in undressed form midway through the piece. The instrumental palette of Mantovani's orchestra is broad, with the appearance of a harpsichord an especially nice touch for 1961 (in Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring, track 11); perhaps Mitch Miller was the inspiration here, but Milner's arrangement sounds nothing like those of the American producer. The organ at London's Kingsway Hall is also incorporated into the music with piquant results, although Decca's engineers, doubtless doing their best, were a bit outrun by Mantovani's burgeoning inspiration. The album as a whole offers a group of multilayered fantasies on hymn tunes unlike anything else you've ever heard, either within Mantovani's oeuvre or anywhere else. A curious defect in the copy reviewed here is that when loaded into a digital player many tracks jumped at their ends to the concluding Rock of Ages, although they played fine when started separately. Highly recommended. --- James Manheim, Rovi

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