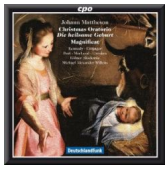
Johann Mattheson: Christmas Oratorio – Magnificat (2009)



Die heilsame Geburt und Menschwerdung unsers Herrn und Heilandes Jesu Christi *1 Choral. Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her 1:02 2 Rezitativ. Es begab sich aber zu der Zeit 0:44 3 Aria. Der Mensch, so auf dem ganzen Kreis der Erden 2:31 4 Rezitativ. Da machte sich auch auf Joseph aus Galiläa 0:44 5 Arie. Der Väter Wunsch, ihr sehnlich's Hoffen 2:19 6 Rezitativ. Und als sie daselbst waren 0:38 7 Arie. Man darf dir einen kleinen Raum versagen 2:26 8 Chor. Aus Zion bricht an der schöne Glanz Gottes 1:02 9 Rezitativ. Und es waren Hirten in derselbigen Gegend auf dem Felde 0:38 10 Arie. Der blöde Mensch entsetzt sich vor dem Blicke 2:27 11 Rezitativ. Und der Engel sprach zu ihnen 0:06 12 Arie. Fürchtet euch nicht! 1:46 13 Arie. Du willst in einer Krippen liegen 3:00 14 Choral. So merket nun das Zeichen recht 0:47 15 Rezitativ. Und alsobald war da bei dem Engel die Menge 0:16 16 Chor der Engel. Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe 3:14 17 Arie. Dir, Gott und Mensch, sei ewig Ehr' und Ruhm 2:23 18 Ritornello 0:43 19 Rezitativ. Und da die Engel von ihnen gen Himmer fuhren 0:11 20 Chor der Hirten. Lasset und hingehen gen Bethlehem 1:56 21 Rezitativ. Und sie kamen eilend und funden beide 1:33 22 Arie. Sterbliche, besingt mit Freuden 4:15 23 Choral. Lob, Ehr sie Gott im höchsten Thron 1:20*

Magnificat a due cori

24 Sinfonia et Coro. Meine Seele erhebet den Herren 2:41 25 Rezitativ. Elende Magd! Wie ist doch geschehen? 1:22 26 Arie. Heilig, heilig heißt sein Name 3:31 27 Rezitativ. Mit seinem Arm übt er gewalt'ge Streiche 1:12 28 Arie. Sein Arm zerstreut und übt Gewalt 1:37 29 Rezitativ. Wer hungrig ist, komm' her! 0:29 30 Arie. Ich leide Durst, er hungert meiner Seelen 2:31 31 Rezitativ. Es fällt ihm ein 0:26 32 Chor. Wie er geredet hat unsern Väter 2:27 33 Sinfonia et Coro. Meine Seele erhebet den Herren 2:46

Nicki Kennedy, Anna Crookes - soprano Ursula Eittinger, Dorothee Merkel - contralto Andreas Post, Sven Hansen – tenor Stephan MacLeod, Johannes Gsänger - bass Die Kölner Akademie Michael Alexander Willens – conductor

This is the third oratorio by Johann Mattheson which I have heard and reviewed in a fairly short space of time. For many years hardly any of his music was available on disc, but these three releases show a remarkable interest in Mattheson, who is best known for his writings on musical subjects.

He was educated as a singer, and also learnt to play the keyboard, the viola da gamba, violin, oboe, flute and lute. His first public appearances as a singer and organist were at the age of nine. The first stage of his career was as a singer in opera: he participated in various performances at the Oper am Gänsemarkt. He also composed some operas. This phase lasted until 1705 when he accepted the post of secretary to the English ambassador in Hamburg. In the following years he became known as a translator and as a writer on music. He published several books which are still often referred to as they give much information about performance practice and the aesthetic ideals in Germany in his time.

In 1715 he became cantor at Hamburg Cathedral, a position he held until 1728 when he had to leave his job due to progressive deafness. In this capacity he composed various oratorios for festivities like Christmas and Easter. They were mostly split into two parts, performed before and after the sermon. Only recently I reviewed a recording of the Christmas oratorio Das größte Kind. It dates from 1720 and is very different from this Christmas oratorio which is from 1715 and is one of the first pieces he composed for Hamburg Cathedral. Whereas in Das größte Kind not a single line from the Bible is used, the core of this oratorio is the text of Luke 2, 1-18, which is sung in the form of recitatives by the Evangelist. And in this oratorio the allegorical characters that feature in Das größte Kind are absent.

Musically these two works are also very different. The arias, written on a poetic text of a reflective nature, are less virtuosic and less operatic than in the oratorio of 1720. It is also remarkable that it contains several references to the past. The oratorio begins and ends with stanzas from the 16th-century hymn 'Vom Himmel hoch'. Mattheson doesn't use the well-known melody which Martin Luther wrote in 1539, but an older melody from 1535, after a then popular song. It is also quoted in the chorus 'Aus Zion bricht an der schöne Glanz Gottes'. The chorus of the angels, 'Ehre sei Gott', is composed in the stile antico, and the chorus of the shepherds, 'Lasset uns hingehen', is a fugue.

Only a couple of arias have a dacapo; sometimes a whole aria is repeated from beginning to end. One aria uses a biblical text: the angel singing 'Fürchtet euch nicht!' (Fear not!). But in fact it is more a kind of arioso than a real aria. It is followed by a 'real' aria for soprano, here given to the second soprano. In most arias the singer is accompanied by strings and basso continuo. In the bass aria 'Der Väter Wunsch' two horns are added, and the duet 'Sterbliche, besingt mit Freuden' contains a solo part for the violin. In the intimate aria 'Man darf dir einen kleinen Raum versagen' the soprano is supported by flute, viola and bc. This suits the content well, and the second half says: "Come into my heart for your comfort." In the chorales and the chorus 'Aus Zion bricht' Mattheson adds parts for two trumpets, two horns and timpani.

The other work on this disc is a setting of the Magnificat. That is to say: Mattheson keeps only two lines from the original biblical text (in German translation). The other verses are replaced by a poetic paraphrase, divided over recitatives and arias. The Magnificat is written for two choirs, each consisting of soprano, alto, tenor and bass. It begins with a Sinfonia for the whole orchestra which consists of flute, two trumpets, timpani, strings and basso continuo. A duet by the two sopranos follows, who are then joined by the tutti. In the first aria soprano I is supported by solo violin and bc. Next the bass has a recitative in which some elements in the text are singled out through extended coloraturas. He then sings an aria which begins with the text: "His arm scatters and exercises might". Mattheson defies expectation and refrains from using the trumpets here - only strings. The second soprano has a beautiful aria with flute and bc: "I suffer thirst, my soul hungers". After another recitative the piece ends with the other line from the biblical text Mattheson has kept: "As he has spoken to our fathers, to Abraham and his seed forever", written in the stile antico. The piece closes with a repeat of the opening section.

The Mattheson we meet in the Christmas oratorio on this disc is more 'conventional', as it were, than the Mattheson of Das größte Kind. The Magnificat a due cori, on the other hand, is anything but conventional. At least I can't remember having ever heard a Magnificat, in which the biblical text was largely replaced by a free poetic text. Because of the combination of these two compositions this disc deserves the attention of lovers of baroque vocal music. Like the other two recordings I have referred to it shows that Mattheson is more than a theorist and has to be taken seriously as a composer. New Grove lists quite a number of oratorios from his pen, and it is a shame that a considerable part of his oeuvre in this department is lost.

I was not completely happy with the previous two recordings, also directed by Michael Alexander Willens. In both cases there were some weak links in the cast. This disc is the best of the three, with all soloists giving fine accounts of themselves. The part of the Evangelist is given an immaculate performance by Andreas Post. The soprano parts are divided over the two sopranos. I don't know whether this was indicated by the composer, but it was certainly a good idea as the voices of Nicki Kennedy and Anna Crookes are sufficiently different to tell them apart. The other 'second voices' (alto, tenor and bass) are used as ripienists, who only sing in the tutti sections. These are generally well sung, although sometimes a slight vibrato creeps in, especially in the chorale settings which open and end the oratorio. The playing of the orchestra is also good, and the solo and obbligato parts are beautifully executed. I would like to mention especially Catherine Manson who plays the violin solos in both works. The only criticism is that some of the recitatives are slowish and should have been sung with more rhythmic freedom.---Johan van Veen, musicweb-international.com

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