

Alexander Agricola - A Secret Labyrinth (1999)



In The "Chant Sur Le Livre" Style 1 "Gaudeamus Omnes In Domino" A 2 2:38 2 "Du Tous Biens Playne" A 3 2:12 3 "Dung Aultre Amer" A 3 1:10 4 "Virgo Sub Ethereis" A3 2:15
Missa Guazzabuglio 5 Kyrie From Missa Je Ne Demande A 4 4:13 6 Gloria From Missa Secundi Toni A 4 8:21 7 Credo From Missa Le Serviteur A 4 8:36 8 Sanctus From Missa Re-fa-mi-fa A 4 3:45 9 Agnus Dei From Missa In Myne Zyn A 4 8:26 3 Chansons 10 "Je Nay Dueil" A 4 (Bergerette) 7:20 11 "Se Mieulx Ne Vient D'amours" A 3 (Rondeau) 2:27 12 "Fortuna Desperata" A 6 (Canzona) 5:37 - 13 "Salve Regina" A 4 9:13 Huelgas
Ensemble: Soprano [Discantus] – Katelijne Van Laethem, Marie-Claude Vallin Countertenor – Pascal Bertin, Rannveig Sigurdardóttir Tenor – Eitan Sorek, Eric Mentzel, Harry Van Berne, Matthew Vine Baritone – Lieven Termont, Marius Van Altena Bass – Harry van der Kamp, Peter Dijkstra, Stephan Macleod Conductor – Paul Van Nevel

Alexander Agricola was viewed in his time as one of the major musical artists of his day; in old sources, he is referred to as "the divine Alexander" -- a source dating to 1503 states that Agricola could "make music shine clearer than the finest silver." That his reputation, even among many experts in Renaissance music, has not survived since Agricola's death of the plague in Valladolid in 1506 seems a quirk of history. There are many attributes of Agricola that are appealing to modern listeners attuned to Renaissance polyphony, particularly his highly unconventional approach to harmony; brilliant, flowing textures; and intense emotionalism. Paul van Nevel and Huelgas Ensemble's Agricola: A Secret Labyrinth, while not perfect, is a huge step in the right direction to reclaim Alexander Agricola for twenty-first century listeners.

Van Nevel and Huelgas Ensemble have long proven surprisingly consistent in the excellence of their performance of late Medieval and early Renaissance music -- Agricola: A Secret Labyrinth would fall into the latter category. Therefore, it is equally surprising that the disc gets off to such a weak start in the florid two-part piece Gaudeamus omnes in Domino. The soloist is uncertain with the music, drops out notes, and generally does not get this one off the ground, yet the remainder of the disc is much better. Moreover, it is certainly well worth hearing -- check out the

hair-raising sonorities in the "Sanctus" from Missa Re-fa-mi-re-fa or the pre-Mannerist sound of the Canzona Fortuna desperata, the one piece that comes closest for Agricola to being a "hit" by virtue of the infrequent performances it has gained. Perhaps conscious of Agricola's severe shortcomings in terms of recorded literature, van Nevel elects to patch together a mass out of individual movements from five of Agricola's eight mass settings. The pieces do flow together nicely, but listeners should be advised that this so-called "Missa Guazzabuglio" is a pastiche of mass movements and not a genuine work.

In terms of performance, aside from the hesitant opening piece, van Nevel and Huelgas make the best case for Agricola's dark and rather bitter-sounding music. With any luck, Huelgas Ensemble's Agricola: A Secret Labyrinth will help open the door for others to follow, as Agricola's extraordinarily large and varied output, available in print since 1970, remains an uninvestigated labyrinth in its own right in which we are far from finding the exit. ---Uncle Dave Lewis, AllMusic Review

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