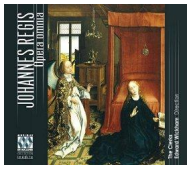
Johannes Regis - Opera Omnia (2009)



CD1 *1. Celsitonantis ave genitrix ~ Abrahae fit promissio [7:21]* Missa Ecce ancilla Domini ~ Ne timeas Maria *2. Kyrie [4:29] 3. Gloria [7:46] 4. Credo [12:33] 5. Sanctus et Benedictus [10:09] 6. Agnus Dei [5:25]*
Motets
7.Ave Maria virgo serena à 5 [7:33] 8.Ave Maria à 3 [2:27] 9. Lux solemnis ~ Repleti sunt omnes [10:14]
CD2
1. Clangat plebs [7:25]
Missa L'homme armé ~ Dum sacrum mysterium
2. Kyrie [4:03] 3. Gloria [7:32] 4. Credo [7:44] 5. Sanctus et Benedictus [6:24] 6. Agnus Dei [4:04]
Motets et chansons
7. Lauda Syon salvatorem ~ Ego sum panis vivus [6:24] 8. Puisque ma damme ~ Je m'en voy [2:01] 9. S'il vous plaist [1:34] 10. Patrem vilayge [3:51] 11. O admirabile commercium ~ Verbum caro [7:34]
The Clerks Edward Wickham - director Carys Lane, Helen Neeves - soprano Lucy Ballard, Ruth Massey - alto Tom Raskin, Christopher Watson - ténor Jonathan Arnold, Robert Macdonald, Edward Wickham - basse

The Clerks under their long-time conductor, Edward Wickham, have recorded a splendid and much needed two-CD set containing all the extant works of the fifteenth century Burgundian composer, Johannes Regis (c.1425-c.1496), on the Musique en Wallonie label. This is actually a well-established (since 1971) label based in Liège which specializes in repertoire of French-speaking Belgium. The label's mission is essentially to apply the highest production standards to the revival of – especially – early music from the region and set right unjust neglect.

Regis is known to have been highly thought of by his contemporaries – including the exacting Johannes Tinctoris, who placed Regis alongside such celebrated and accomplished composers as Ockeghem and Busnoys. Given the level of informed insight which we know Tinctoris to have possessed, it surely behoves us to take his assessment seriously. And to look favorably on the result of work by The Clerks – especially when Regis is represented in the current catalog by only two other recordings… Puisque ma damme/Je m'en voy [CD 2 tr.8] is on Gothic Voices' collection, 'The Castle of Fair Welcome' (Hyperion Helios CDH55274); the masses Ecce ancilla Domini/Ne timeas Maria [CD.1 tr.s 2-6] and Dum sacrum mysterium/L'homme armé [CD.2 tr.s2-6] were recorded in 2000 by Schola Discantus under Kevin Moll (on Lyrichord 8044). Indeed, much of what we hear on these two generous and stylishly-produced CDs is recorded for the first time anyway.

From the first bar of this sublime yet highly focused music it's easy to see how right Tinctoris was; and how strange is Regis' neglect. The Clerks reveal a gentleness (listen to the Sanctus, Benedictus in the Ecce ancilla Domnini/Ne timeas Maria Mass [CD.1 tr.5], for example). The line and melody are so full of confidence as almost to be detached from any momentum which the mass requires. In fact this lightness is borne of a contemplative sureness and technical certainty that the voices will "find their own way" through each movement. Nothing is forced. Nor is the structure lost or obscured. In other words, these are very idiomatic and very persuasive performances.

One merit of The Clerks' approach has always been that the individual voices are emphasized; their clear and careful articulation makes listening a more intense experience, and one that keeps us listening to every instant of the music. The voices (two sopranos, two altos, two tenors and three bases, including Wickham) are also closely recorded. That's of all the more benefit here since most of this music is likely to be new to most listeners, however much it's in a familiar genre.

Regis is known to have known and worked with Binchois and Dufay, although his style is very much his own, while acknowledging theirs. Indeed Dufay tried unsuccessfully for a number of years to bring Regis to Cambrai after Binchois' death in 1460. Regis follows Dufay's practice in the Masses of using two separate cantus firmus antiphons; indeed Dufay also used Ecce ancilla as a source. Regis' treatment is very different, however, with a greater and more subtle way of arousing emotion through contrasting major and minor moods. In the other Mass, L'homme armé/Dum sacrum mysterium, multiple cantus firmi are also employed to perhaps even greater effect. Regis is clearly interested in some remarkable coloring effects associated with the religious symbolism of the Mass' theme… the use of canon to underline the sense of multiple religious strengths, for instance.

These are not particularly taxing subtleties to achieve. But The Clerks do well to retain the detachment needed when working through the specially rich Credo sections of these Masses, for example. The temptation would have been to have the sonorities stand out in their own right, when in fact the depth of expressiveness must be in the service of the text and devotional purpose of the Mass in order to make its greatest impact. The Clerks have succeeded well in this regard. There is a unity of style quite consistent with the architecture on which the Masses were conceived that makes these colors sound plausible by being evident – yet not in any way romantic. But this is only one reason why the CD set can be as highly recommended as it can.

In his lifetime, Regis was best known for his (five part) motets. These were new in the 1470s… four voices were the most other composers had written for. Again, it's Regis' interest in texture that explains his use of a second lower voice. The Clerks strike just the right balance between the added drama and sonority which this practice supports, and a necessarily calm and unostentatious unfolding of the texts set this way. Above all, the ensemble highlights the many differences between all the motets presented here as well as the beauty and character which they all have individually: again, the temptation would have been to approach them as some kind of tone paintings. They're not. There is far more energy, reflection and rhythmical structure to let these motets fend for themselves in that way.

Johannes Regis, then, is a composer who benefits enormously from this expert, stylish and persuasive set of performances. Given the beauty, delicacy and character of his music, it's hard to explain the neglect of the composer. To have champions, in The Clerks, who have so fully and unselfconsciously entered into the idiom of Regis and here produced a pair of CDs which unobtrusively yet unambivalently presents a rounded and highly pleasing view of the composer, is to everyone's advantage. To have all his known works packaged with texts and useful background essay is a further plus. So, if fifteenth century polyphonic music interests you, this is a set you can hardly afford to be without. Likely to remain a standard for some time to come. Warmly recommended. --- Mark Sealey, classical.net

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