

Michael Praetorius – Mass For Christmas Morning (McCreesh) [1994]

Written by bluesever

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1 Processional: Christum Wir Sollen Loben Schon 3:14 2 Introit: Puer Natus In Bethlehem 7:29 3 Kyrie (Missa: Gantz Teudsch) 4:31 4 Gloria (Missa: Gantz Teudsch) 7:36 5 Collect: Der Herr Sei Mit Euch 1:08 6 Epistle: So Schreibt Der Heilig Propheten Jesajas 2:01 7 Organ Prelude: Praemabulum 1:09 8 Gradual Hymn: Vom Himmel Hoch Da Komm Ich Her 4:03 9 Gospel: So Schreibt Der Heilige Lukas 3:51 10 Credo: Wir Glauben All An Einen Gott (Composed By Samuel Scheidt) 5:12 11 Organ Prelude: Resonet In Laudibus 1:09 12 Pulpit Hymn: Quem Pastores Laudavere 4:36 13 Sonata: Padouana A 5 (Composed By Johann Hermann Schein) 3:05 14 The Lord's Prayer: Vater Unser, Der Du Bist Im Himmel - Words Of Institution: Unser Herr Jesus Christus 2:35 15 Sanctus Motet: Jesaja Dem Propheten Das Geschah 6:25 16 Organ Prelude: Wie Schön Leuchtet Der Morgenstern (Composed By Samuel Scheidt) 1:35 17 Communion Motet: Wie Schön Leuchtet Der Morgenstern 3:26 18 Communion Motet: Uns Ist Ein Kindlein Heut Geborn 2:11 19 Post-Communion: Der Herr Sei Mit Euch 1:19 20 Benediction: Der Herr Segne Dich Und Behüte Dich 1:02 21 Final Hymn: Puer Nobis Nascitur 2:56 22 Organ Voluntary: Nun Lob Mein Seel 3:04 23 Recessional: In Dulci Jubilo 5:23 Tessa Bonner (Soprano) [8, 9, 16, 22] Sarah Pendlebury (Soprano) [8, 9, 16, 18] Constanze Backes (Soprano) [16] Susan Hemington Jones (Soprano) [16, 22] Angus Smith (Tenor) [8, 9, 16] Tom Phillips (Tenor) [9] Julian Podger (Tenor) [9] Robert Horn (Tenor) [9] Mark Le Brocq (Tenor) [16, 22] Donald Greig (Baritone) [12, 16] Simon Grant (Bass) [9, 12, 16] Stephen Charlesworth (Bass) [9] Hannelore Devaere (Harp) [18] Timothy Roberts (Organ) [21] Boys' Choir And Congregational Choir Of Roskilde Cathedral Chorus Master – Finn Evald, Kristian Olesen Gabrieli Consort & Players Paul McCreesh – conductor

A refreshing antidote to all those unimaginative festive compilations, this beautifully presented disc demands your attention this Christmas.

Most seasonal CDs probably end up as coasters or gathering dust on a shelf somewhere but this is one festive disc that can be played all year round. As the cover points out it's a reconstructed Lutheran Christmas service 'as it might have been celebrated around 1620' and it

includes contributions from Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654) and Johann Hermann Schein (1586-1630). But it was the prolific and talented Praetorius (born Michael Schulze) who single-handedly produced much of the Lutheran church music heard in northern Germany in the early 17th century.

What Paul McCreesh has achieved here is remarkable. He chose Roskilde Cathedral because it provides the ideal setting for this collection of hymns (chorales) and polychoral motets; the choirs and instrumental groups are arrayed on the ground floor and galleries, the congregation gathered in the nave. This attention to detail pays off handsomely, producing a realistic and airy soundstage that is as deep as it is wide. Couple this with committed playing and singing and the result is nothing short of revelatory.

The opening Processional: 'Christum wir sollen loben schon' is based on a melody by Luther himself, and begins with the distant treble of Anders Engberg-Pedersen, soon joined by the choir. It sounds magical, as if heard from across the fields on a still and frosty Christmas morn. The unaccompanied choir is rich but not too resonant and the Introit: 'Puer natus in Bethlehem' brings in the congregation – very much at the centre of the Lutheran service – as well. It is gravely beautiful music and the transition from one segment of the mass to the next appears seamless, a striking characteristic of this performance as a whole.

The soloists are very well recorded and the cathedral organ (apparently close to the sound Praetorius would have known) is powerfully felt yet always discreetly played. Surprising, perhaps, is the animation – even jollity – that this music conveys; it's more bright-eyed and apple-cheeked than one might expect from this Reformed liturgy. Indeed, the congregation and organ really raise Roskilde's vaulted roof with their lusty singing.

As with the Introit the Kyrie and Gloria are taken from Praetorius's *Polyhymnia caduceatrix & Panegyrica* of 1619; they mark a change of emphasis, employing just the instrumentalists, organ and soloists. Austere it may seem but McCreesh ensures the rhythms are always supple, the balance between players and singers carefully judged. And for those sceptical of period performance this disc demonstrates – in abundance – just how revealing such an approach can be when it comes to detail, rhythm and overall lucidity, yet without sacrificing warmth and body (just listen to the full-blooded 'Amen' that ends the Gloria).

The Collect and Epistle are intoned from afar with responses from the organ and choir. It's at moments like these that the spatial effects McCreesh strives for are most clearly audible. There

is just the right amount of resonance to the voice, echoing throughout the vaulted space, and in the organ prelude that follows Timothy Roberts adds real splendour and weight to the service without turning his brief solo into a showpiece.

The Gradual hymn 'Vom himmel hoch da komm ich her' has a robust contribution from baritone Donald Greig and some warm, full-bodied singing from the congregation. What a palpable sense of celebration there is at this point, the organ underpinning it all with such authority.

After the intoned Gospel comes Scheidt's Credo 'Wir glauben all an einen Gott', again based on a melody by Luther. As the very core of the mass the Credo is sung with a deep sense of devotion, the largely unaccompanied prayer rising and filling every last corner of the cathedral. After the gentle organ prelude the congregation and organ launch into the rousing Pulpit hymn 'Quem pastores laudavere'. As before there is a highly effective antiphonal 'dialogue' between the distant trebles and those gathered in the nave.

Johannes Hermann Schein's Sonata: Padouana a 5 for cornetts, sackbuts and organ has a strange, ethereal quality, no doubt heightened by the distinctive timbres of these instruments playing together. It is reflective, a perfect precursor to the intoned Lord's Prayer and Words of Institution that follow. Again one is struck by how expertly McCreesh weaves these disparate threads into the overall tapestry.

The Sanctus motet: 'Jesaja dem Propheten das geschah', culled from the Polyhymnia caduceatrix, has some bright, crystal-clear singing from the sopranos in particular, aided and abetted by the flutes, recorders and, for emphasis, that magisterial organ. The motet ends in a great panoply of sound from all the assembled forces. Quite a contrast compared with the ensuing organ prelude and Communion motets: 'Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern' and 'Uns ist ein Kindlein geboren', which are on a much smaller, more intimate scale. Sarah Pendlebury's still, pure soprano is ideal in the serene second motet, the harp adding an aura of warmth to both singer and choir.

The intoned Post-Communion: 'Der Herr sei mit euch' and the Benediction: 'Der Herr segne dich und behüte dich' – the latter with a sustained and radiant 'Amen' for choir over organ – signals the service is near its end. The congregation joins all the various forces for the ebullient final hymn 'Puer nobis nascitur' and the organ voluntary – with its appropriate bell-like figures – heralds the start of the Recessional: 'In dulci jubilo'. This is the musical high point of this magnificent performance, the raised trumpets and thunder of drums bringing a distinctly martial

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air to the proceedings. The sopranos and organ add to the jubilant mood and the mass ends in a blaze of affirmation.

This is a disc that certainly won't be filed away once the festivities are over. Indeed, it's one of those rare recordings in which one seems to be eavesdropping on a live occasion, such is the warmth and spontaneity of the music making. The engineers must be commended for ensuring it all sounds so natural in terms of balance and blend; ditto Paul McCreesh and Robin A. Leaver, whose scholarly notes put the music into its historical context.

A refreshing antidote to all those unimaginative festive compilations, this beautifully presented disc demands your attention this Christmas. And at just £6-£7 it's not just a cracker it's also a steal. --- Dan Morgan, MusicWeb International

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