

Palestrina - How Fair Thou Art: Biblical Passions (2016)

Wpisany przez bluesever

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01. *Alma redemptoris mater* 02. *Quam pulchri sunt gressus tui* 03. *Pulcræ sunt genæ tuæ*
04. *Tota pulchra es amica mea* 05. *Nigra sum, sed formosa* 06. *Regina coeli* 07. *Trahe me,*
post te 08. *Veni, veni dilecte mi* 09. *Surge, propera amica mea* 10. *Descendi in hortum meum*
11. *Ave regina coelorum* 12. *Sicut liliū inter spinas* 13. *Osculetur me* 14. *Ecce tu pulcher es*
15. *Sicut liliū inter spinas* 16. *Salve Regina* The King's Singers: David Hurley
countertenor Timothy Wayne-Wright countertenor Julian Gregory tenor Christopher Bruerton
baritone Christopher Gabbitts baritone Jonathan Howard bass

The King's Singers return with a new early-music recording that features 12 of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's beautiful polyphonic choral settings of the 'Canticum Canticorum' – better known as 'The Song of Songs' or Canticles, a collection of poetry in the Hebrew Bible on the theme of the joy and ecstasy of human love. These settings are framed by four of Palestrina's Marian motets, works in honour of the Virgin Mary which he composed throughout his life.

This recording is the first to feature performances from the group's new tenor Julian Gregory. ---
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Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina is almost exclusively associated with sacred music. That is understandable as he was in the service of the church all his life. However, he also wrote madrigals: in 1555 he published a book with four-part madrigals, followed many years later by two books of madrigals for five and four voices respectively (1581, 1586). This part of his output

receives little attention; the discography includes only one disc exclusively devoted to his madrigals. The motets on texts from the Song of Songs (*Canticum Canticorum* as they are called in the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible) are pretty close to the madrigals as far as their stylistic features are concerned. The King's Singers have recorded a selection of eleven motets from the collection of 29 which he published as his fourth book of motets in 1584. One of the texts appears twice: the first setting performed here is from the first book of motets of 1569.

"Framing the twelve (sic) settings of *Canticum Canticorum* on this recording are four Marian motets by Palestrina", David Hurley writes in his liner-notes. These are the classical four Marian antiphons which have been set so often throughout history. Referring to the *Salve Regina* he states that "[the] fervour of this setting matches the passion of the settings of words from the Song of Songs." It is regrettable that he makes no attempt to connect the two categories represented here and also misses the point in regard to the meaning of the Song of Songs motets.

The connection between them is the veneration of the Virgin Mary. Since ancient times the love poetry of the Song of Songs has been given a spiritual interpretation. In his notes to *Pro Cantione Antiqua*'s recording (Hyperion, 1994) Bruno Turner writes: "But the Songs must be seen, and the music heard, in the context of an age of Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation fervour, an age devoted by Roman authority to the triumph of the Virgin as well as her tenderness. The Spouse of the allegory is not only the Church or the individual soul but the bride who is represented by Our Lady the Mediator and by the Queen of Heaven, the One arrayed for battle, even the woman of the Apocalypse; certainly to Palestrina's contemporaries, the Virgin who won the Battle of Lepanto (1571) and for whom the Papacy instituted the Feast of Our Lady of Victory." This also explains that Palestrina dedicated this collection to Pope Gregory XIII. "[This] particular Pope was a worldly man", Hurley writes. That may be true but in respect to these motets his previous mention of Gregory's active support of the Counter Reformation is far more relevant. After all, the status of the Virgin Mary was one of the main points of difference between Protestants and Catholics.

From that angle the mixture of motets on texts from the Song of Songs and the four Marian antiphons makes much sense. They are certainly connected in the passion with which they are set - as far as one can expect that from Palestrina who certainly is not the most 'passionate' of composers - but more significantly they emphasize the importance of the Virgin Mary in the Roman Catholic doctrine. They represent two sides of the church, as it were. The antiphons were part of the liturgy: they are a fixed part of the Liturgy of the Hours. The Song of Songs motets, on the other hand, are not suitable for liturgical use but were rather written for domestic performance. The fact that no fewer than eleven editions of this collection are known attests to their popularity.

These differences should also be reflected in the performances and maybe even the venues where they are recorded. The acoustic is pretty intimate and that suites the motets rather well. The same goes for the 'madrigalistic' approach of The King's Singers. As a result the texts are clearly audible, despite the largely polyphonic texture of these motets. There is not much text expression here and the performers don't try to underline some elements in the text. However, there are some traces of contrast between the motets, for instance the jubilant nature of *Tota pulchra es* - "All fair thou art" which inspired to this disc's title - and the ensuing *Nigra sum*: "I am black but beautiful" which is dominated by dark colours.

I would have liked a little more reverberation in the Marian antiphons. Their liturgical character doesn't come off that well; I also think that this kind of music requires a slightly larger ensemble than one-to-a-part as we have here. I also would prefer a more 'liturgical' style of singing where the words would get more weight.

I just wonder which audiences a disc like this aims at. Those who want to have a recording of the complete Song of Songs motets can choose from several interpretations, for instance Pro Cantione Antiqua but also the Hilliard Ensemble (Virgin Classics), Magnificat (Linn Records), the Ensemble William Byrd (Jade) and the Capella Dvca Venetia (CPO). There are probably more. This disc may appeal mainly to admirers of The King's Singers. They will certainly not be disappointed. ---Johan van Veen, musicweb-international.com

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