



Gregor Joseph Werner: Vol. III: Masses and Motets

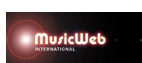
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The disc to be reviewed here is the third volume in a project devoted to the oeuvre of Gregor Joseph Werner. He is pretty well-known, but mainly as Joseph Haydn's predecessor at the post of Kapellmeister at the Esterházy court. Until recently, his oeuvre has hardly been given any attention. The main exception is his Musicalischer Instrumental-Calender, a set of twelve Parthien for two violins and basso continuo about the months of the year. Most of his instrumental output has been lost. The largest part of his extant oeuvre – around 420 works – consists of sacred vocal music, including about 70 masses, three Requiems, four settings of the Te Deum, 18 oratorios on German texts and many liturgical works. In recent times several recordings of his oeuvre have been released, such as his oratorio Der Gute Hirt, directed by György Vashegyi (Accent, 2020). Two years ago, audite released the first volume of the present project, which comprised instrumental Pastorellas and a number of settings of the Salve Regina. It was followed last year by a recording of one of his Requiems. This third volume includes two masses, four Marian antiphons and a sinfonia.

Werner was born in Ybbs an der Donau, and started his career as an organist at Melk Abbey. He married in Vienna, where, according to the traditional view, he may have been a pupil of Johann Joseph Fux. However, Lajos Rovatkay believes there are good reasons to assume that it was rather Antonio Caldara who was his teacher. In 1728 he was appointed Kapellmeister at Esterházy. Just like German aristocrats of the late 17th century were impressed by the splendour of the French court under Louis XIV and aimed at imitating that at their own courts, their peers of the mid-18th century wanted to imitate the splendour of the imperial court in Vienna. Werner was selected with the purpose of creating something similar in Esterházy.

It is mostly impossible to date Werner's works and therefore it is impossible to follow his stylistic development. "Werner's dated works show that he already made use of all his progressive harmonic expressive colours shortly after his appointment as Kapellmeister at the Esterházy court in Eisenstadt (1728) (...) and also revealed himself as a great contrapuntal master", Lajos Rovatkay states in his liner-notes.

The two masses consist of the usual sections: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus – Benedictus and Agnus Dei. All of them are divided into sections for tutti and for one to four solo voices. The instrumental accompaniment is very modest: two violins and basso continuo. The violins often play a substantial role, more than just an accompaniment. In the 'Laudamus te' from the Missa Sunt bona mixta malis the organ plays an obbligato part. This is a solo for soprano, and so are 'Quoniam tu



solus sanctus' (Gloria) and Pleni sunt coeli' (Sanctus). The soprano solos are the most technically demanding; in comparison, the only tenor solo (Benedictus) is rather modest. In this mass the Kyrie is a single section, and not divided into three. Likewise, the Crucifixus is not singled out, but part of the section which opens with 'Et incarnatus est'. Werner shows his skills in counterpoint with several fugal episodes. It is not known why this mass has the title Sunt bona mixta malis (The good are mixed with the bad). Likewise, the idea behind the title of the other mass is unknown: Post nubila Phoebus – After the clouds, the sun. In this mass the Kyrie is split into three sections; the Christe eleison is a solo for bass. There are two solo sections for soprano: 'Quoniam tu solus' (Gloria) and – like in the other mass – 'Pleni sunt coeli' (Sanctus). The Domine Deus (Gloria) is a solo for tenor. In several sections, the soli and the tutti alternate. Notable is that here the Crucifixus is a separate section.

In these two masses Werner mixes the style of his time with the stile antico; Rovatkay notices that Werner stayed away from the 'galant' idiom that became fashionable in the course of his career. His sacred works have undoubtedly more depth than much that was written in his time. The four antiphons are masterpieces of counterpoint, and here the influence of the 'old style' of the Franco-Flemish school manifests itself. That said, Werner does not overlook the possibilities to use harmony for expressive reasons, such as in Alma redemptoris mater, on the closing words "peccatorum miserere".

The harmonic progressions in the Sonata prima are remarkable. This work dates from 1735 and was written to welcome Prince Paul Anton Esterházy returning from his grand tour. It is written after the model of the Italian sonata da chiesa, with four movements.

Sometimes, when a musicologist or performer discovers a 'forgotten master', he is carried away and overstates the importance of his discovery. Lajos Rovatkay is clearly very enthusiastic about his discovery of Werner and rates him highly. Having heard the previous two recordings under his direction and some other performances, I agree with his assessment that Werner was a true master. The efforts to explore his oeuvre are well deserved, and I hope that we may expect more. If a hitherto hardly-known composer's oeuvre is presented, it helps if the performances are really top-class. That is the case here. Given the important role of the soprano and the character of her part, Magdalene Harer deserves a special mention. She is a specialist in early music, and her voice is perfectly suited to this repertoire. She has no problems with the coloratura, thanks to the agility of her voice. The other three soloists are her equals, and all four of them blend perfectly in the many ensembles. Voktett Hannover is a fine vocal ensemble which produces a transparent sound, which is important in these largely polyphonic works. La festa musicale is the perfect partner for the instrumental parts.

If you have purchased the previous volumes, don't hesitate to add this disc to your collection. It will give you much to enjoy and to admire. Let's hope for more Werner.

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Gregor Joseph Werner (1693-1766)

Masses and Motets – Vol 3

Magdalene Harer (soprano), Anne Bierwirth (contralto), Tobias Hunger (tenor), Markus Flaig (bass)

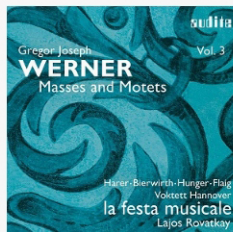
Voktett Hannover, la festa musicale/Lajos Rovatkay

rec. 2023, Neustädter Hof- und Stadtkirche St. Johannis, Hanover, Germany

Texts and translations included

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Johan van Veen

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