



Rise up, o Judge of the Earth - Sacred Organ Music

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 01.07.2007)

No slight is intended to the composers of the works on this disc or to the playing of Bernhard Leonardy in suggesting that the main attraction here is the magnificent Klais/Mayer organ of St. Johann's Basilica in Saarbrücken, Germany. Restored by organ manufacturer Mayer in 1999, the instrument is made up of 64 ranks of 99 pipes each, allowing for a combination of 6,336 stops—not the largest organ in the world, but judging from the sound on this disc, certainly one of the more impressive. And an interesting addendum to the enclosed booklet note is a description of the mix of stops deployed in each of the works on the program.

Speaking of the program, I must confess to being unfamiliar with all of the music on this CD, and with all but two of its composers. Heino Schubert (b. 1928) was, for many years, cathedral organist at the Münsterkirche in Essen. Currently retired, Schubert has won a number of prestigious composition prizes for his sacred and instrumental works. His Magnificat: A Triptych on the Melody of the 8th Tone (Hypomyxolidian for the modally minded), is a meditation on the Trinity. Beginning and ending with chimes, the 1963 piece is in a vein that will not be foreign to listeners who know their Hindemith.

Julius Reubke (1834–1858) will probably be the most recognized name among the five composers here. He was a student of Franz Liszt who, in the brief 24 years allotted to him, distinguished himself as a brilliant pianist and organist. His fiendishly difficult B♭-Minor Piano Sonata (with which I am familiar) has had a number of recordings. His 94th Psalm recorded here is in fact a three-movement organ sonata in C Minor, the musical intent of its content being elucidated by scriptural quotations. Though it is not likely to be mistaken for any of Brahms's organ pieces, its vocabulary and manner of speech do fall within that general style of expression.

About Fred M. Bauersachs, alas, I am able to tell you zilch, other than the fact that he was born in 1930. The booklet note gives no biographical information about him, and a Google search on his name returned nothing useful. Unfortunately, I do not have access to the specialist organ journals that might shed further light. Die Bergpredigt crams a great deal of theological symbolism and teaching into its seven short sections. In their combined total of less than 12 minutes, Bauersachs manages to offer musical allusions to Jesus's "Sermon on the Mount," "Sermon on a Level Place," and the "Magnificat," Mary's song of praise taken from the Gospel According to St. Luke. The spiritual mysticism and musical vocabulary of the piece tend unavoidably to evoke comparisons with Messiaen.

Kurt Hessenberg (1908–1994) is the only other composer on this program with whom I have some familiarity, but not through his Fantasia über Sonne der Gerechtigkeit ("Sun of Justice"). A Cassandra Records CD of his Second Symphony and Concerto

for Orchestra offers but two of his major works from among a catalog of some 135 opus numbers in all genres, including opera. His organ compositions—18 in all—are to his overall output, in terms of relative importance, approximately equal in significance to the organ works of Brahms. Henssler's Fantasia is based on a text woven together from three sources that venerate the sun as a symbol of God's goodness, magnificence, and justice. The music's toccata-like style distantly echoes Bach, but Henssler's harmonic adventurousness leads him to places Bach would have found strange. The piece is quite beautiful in a Poulenc-like way, with familiar and predictable chord progressions in sudden juxtaposition to dissonantly deformed harmonies for the sake of shock.

The program ends with our organ player's own Improvisation on "Nun jauchzt dem Herren, alle Welt." Also in a free toccata-like style, the piece is a kaleidoscope of colors and sonorities that serves well its subject of jubilation, as well as being a virtuosic display piece that puts the Klais/Mayer organ front and center.

This is a wonderful disc for any organ music-lover. One can revel in these works if one wishes for the sheer beauty of their sound, without having to relate to their theological foundations. Plaudits to Bernhard Leonardy and Audite's fine recording.