



Music for two Organs

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Audite has produced some of the finest organ recordings I know; among them is the first in their three-volume set of Franck played by Hans-Eberhard Roß, a disc of Christmas Preludes by Giovanni Priuli and Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen, a festive potpourri of organ/choral music from Bonn. Apart from the warmth, clarity and essential spaciousness of these recordings the choice of repertoire and instruments is also inspired. How refreshing to hear Franck played on the expressive yet ultra-refined Goll instrument of St Martin's, Memmingen, rather than on a huge, less-than-subtle Cavallé-Coll, and how bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked those wintry Preludes are made to sound.

The ancient Abbey Church of Muri has a long association with the Habsburg dynasty, so it's appropriate that some of the music here is by Leopold I (1640-1705), otherwise known as Leopold Ignatius Joseph Balthasar Felician. Of the two organists Sydney-born David Blunden is new to me, but Johannes Strobl, Muri's Director of Music, impressed me greatly with that collection of Christmas Preludes. In the choral items – O quam dulcis a 8, Victimae paschali laudes, Veni Sancte Spiritus and the Salve Regina – they are joined by the Choralschola der Cappella Murensis.

The two organs – the 'Evangelienorgel' played by Blunden, the 'Epistelorgel' played by Strobl – were built in 1743 by Joseph and Viktor Ferdinand Brossart. Both have been repaired and restored over the years, most recently in 1991-1992. Situated on either side of the High Altar they set the stage for some delightful interplay and ear-pricking antiphonal effects. That's immediately evident in the opening piece by the Venetian composer – and Kapellmeister at the Habsburg court – Giovanni Priuli.

What a joyful noise these baroque organs make; clearly they aren't large, but their forthright character – not to mention their lovely top-end sparkle – are superbly caught by the Audite engineers. The recording has plenty of body as well, with a discreet but telling bass, and there's no muddying echo either. Most impressive is the enthusiasm and polish of these performers, whose ebullience and sure sense of style give the music such a lift. This tasty fare is nicely contrasted with the much leaner but wonderfully buoyant Conzon a 6 by Giovanni Valentini, who succeeded Priuli as court Kapellmeister in 1626. The latter's piping little Canzone Seconda is a joy to hear; sonorities are always pleasing, the music is perfectly proportioned and all decorations are tastefully executed.

The programme is cleverly constructed too; Priuli's stately O Quam Dulcis a 8 and the dark-hued Easter Sequence are a good foil to what's gone before. There's an extra weight and warmth to the latter – not to mention refined playing, singing and sonics – that cossets the ear and gladdens the heart. Indeed, it's ages since I've heard such disciplined and dulcet tones from Baroque organs, and I suspect the

sense of space and 'air' around the choir is even more tinglesome in multichannel.

After the deliciously florid and very danceable rhythms of Wolfgang Ebner's Partite sopra l'Aria Favorita Froberger's slow Toccata and the fluting Capriccio are taken by Strobl and Blunden respectively; needless to say both pieces are impeccably done. They rejoin the small but beautifully blended choir for what is probably the most moving and atmospheric work here, the Pentecostal Sequence Veni sancte Spiritus. Back in the days of vinyl this is what we called a demonstration-quality recording; happily, that's also true of the CD layer, which suggests Audite have mastered this disc with great skill and sensitivity.

The pieces by Leopold I – now grave, now animated – are accomplished enough, but it's Valentini pupil Johann Kaspar Kerll's cuckoo imitation – a conceit favoured by composers of the period – that's sure to raise a smile. Not only is it artfully written it's also played with evident delight and a wonderful lightness of touch; and there's more mimicry and wit to be heard in the bright, fugal cacophony of grasshoppers in Clamor grillorum campestrum. After that spot of levity Blunden plays the majestic Ricercar by the Austrian Franz Mathias Techelmann, while Strobl and the choir round off this cherishable programme with Techelmann's simple yet deeply affecting Salve Regina; indeed, the splendid acoustics of this venerable building, its characterful organs and the you-are-there recording combine to produce some of the most ravishing sounds imaginable.

Audite have done it again; their consistently high production values – a surprisingly rare commodity in recorded music these days – extend to the glossy, informative and well-presented booklet and super jewel case; alas, it seems the latter may become a rarity, as the first of Audite's new Vierne discs with Hans-Eberhard Roß – awaiting review – comes in a ghastly Digipak. That said, I have no reservations about this Muri disc which, like that Franck set in 2008, could well be one of my picks of the year.

Radiant music, superbly played, sung and recorded; a must for Baroque buffs, organ fanciers and audiophiles alike.