



Paradisi Gloria - Sacred music by Emperor Leopold I

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We are accustomed to the idea of music emanating from royal and aristocratic patronage in the historical periods down to the Romantic Movement, but rather less so to the phenomenon of a royal figure actually composing music himself – Frederick the Great being a notable example. A few generations before him, the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I (ruled 1658-1705) composed a substantial body of choral compositions, probably having been taught by the court composer Antonio Bertali whilst Leopold was only second in line to throne.

On the evidence of this disc Leopold's compositions are accomplished if not especially memorable. In form they adhere to the concertato style of vocal and chamber music of the period, but otherwise they exemplify a comparative sparseness and austerity which does not really link the music to that of Leopold's contemporaries, such as Biber, Charpentier, and Stradella, but harks back to the earlier period of the Baroque era, such as Schütz and Monteverdi. The a capella choral sections of the Tres Lectiones, for example, recall an even earlier period than that, evoking the purer Renaissance polyphony of Palestrina, although the Response of the First Lesson 'Parce mihi, Domine' might put one in mind of Allegri. The fact that all four compositions here are connected with the theme of death rather recall the morbid inclinations of Schütz's patron Count Henry II as the spur to the composition of the Musikalische Exequien by that composer. The Missa pro Defunctis recorded here was written for the funeral of Leopold's first wife, Margarita Teresa, whilst the Tres Lectiones of the first nocturne of the Office for the Dead was composed on the death of his second wife, Claudia Felicitas.

Cappella Murensis and Les Cornets Noirs maintain a due solemnity and steadiness throughout their performances, whether that be by the subtle hues of the cornets and viols in the instrumental interludes, or through the careful and deliberately placed choral textures by the choir in music which often proceeds simply with one syllable to a chord, rather than by long melismas. The second of the Tres Lectiones is a good example of this, with a pregnant silence movingly interpolated in the middle of its Response.

The choral forces are small, so the tutti sections remain intimate and subtly nuanced when juxtaposed with the solo vocal passages. But there is considerable contrast among the latter, as the singers seek to imbue their respective music with a distinctive character. That can be heard to good effect in the Motetto on the seven dolours of the Virgin Mary, where the opening material is passed around almost in operatic fashion like an arioso among the soloists; they are supported by the

expressive accompaniment of the instrumentalists, who sometimes imitate the voices. Although much of the Requiem setting is surprisingly radiant – like the Fauré setting two centuries later, it omits the ‘Dies irae’ section – the soloists transmit an effective plaintive quality in the ‘Agnus Dei’. The bass Lisandro Abadie sounds authoritative and commanding, though the tenor Hans Jörg Mammel is more sensitive and thoughtful in contrast. Alex Potter, taking the (male) alto line, is also sensitive to the vulnerability of the music, and is technically polished, though perhaps there is a certain down-to-earth charm, redolent of Anglican choral singing, which does not always tap the mystical serenity at the core of the music.

One other qualm is that the acoustic of Muri abbey church comes across in this recording as confined, with little reverberation, though that does preserve the character of this music as expressing private grief and mourning, rather than public ceremony. Otherwise this disc is a worthwhile introduction to a very little-known figure in musical history.

