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REVIEWS

Rating: ★★★★★ Highly recommended ★★★★★ Very good ★★★ Good ★★ Average ★ Poor

STAR REVIEW

MAX REGER: COMPLETE ORGAN WORKS

Roberto Marini, organ

Vol.1: Symphonic Fantasy & Fugue in D minor, op.57 ('Inferno'); Fantasy & Fugue in D minor, op.135b; Fantasy & Fugue on BACH, op.46; Fantasy & Fugue in C minor, op.29; Twelve pieces, op.59; Nine Pieces, op.129

Fugatto 041 (2CDs) [157:00]

★★★★★

Vol.2: Variations & Fugue on an Original Theme, op.73; Ten Pieces, op.69; Six Trios, op.47; Twelve Pieces, op.65

Fugatto 042 (2CDs) [155:00]

★★★★★

Vol.3: Chorale Fantasy, 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott', op.27; Chorale Fantasy, 'Freu' dich sehr, O meine Seele', op.30; Chorale Fantasy & Fugue, 'Wie schön leucht' uns der Morgenstern', op.40 no.2; Chorale Fantasy, 'Straf' mich nicht in deinem Zorn!', op.40 no.2; 52 Chorale Preludes for Organ, op.67; Chorale Fantasy & Fugue, 'Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme', op.52 no.2; Chorale Fantasy & Fugue, 'Halleluja! Gott zu loben, bleibe meine Seelenfreud', op.52 no.3; Chorale Preludes, op.67 nos. 5-14

Fugatto 043 (2CDs) [162:00]

★★★★★

Vol 4: Introduction, Passacaglia & Fugue in E minor, op.127; Twelve Pieces, op.80; Three Pieces, op.7; Seven Pieces, op.145

Fugatto 044 (2CDs) [161:00]

★★★★★

In my experience of talking to music lovers over many years, Reger's organœuvre seems to be musical Marmite – you either love it or hate it. If you're in the latter group, read no further. I've loved it since I rushed home from the record shop (remember those?) with my LP of Fernando Germani's *Halleluja! Gott zu loben*, recorded at Selby Abbey, and was immediately captivated by



the dark, mahogany complexity of the vast universe of Reger's contrapuntal imagination. For Bach worshippers, Reger is the great romantic bonus – the composer's own reverence for Bach expressed in re-imagined Fantasies, Toccatas, Fugues, Trios and Chorale Preludes; and Brahms-influenced harmonic structures free-falling into limitless post-Wagnerian realms – but, unlike post-*Gurrelieder* Schoenberg, staying broadly within tonality.

Reger's fecund complexity and penchant for harmonically tortuous cadences can act as a barrier to the uncommitted. But for true believers the logic of these contrapuntal machinations and scrunchy cadences is no empty rhetoric: it's just so satisfying. And however dazzling the surface detail, with Reger – as with Wagner – there is often an underlying plan which, like an architect's computer simulation, slowly reveals itself from the ground up, eventually disclosing a whole cathedral – in sound.

Fugatto's Complete Reger Edition has launched in substantial manner with four double CDs; it is entrusted to Roberto Marini, who boasts among Europe's finest Reger credentials. Professor of organ at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome, Marini was trained by Fernando Germani ▶

THIS ISSUE'S REVIEWERS

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◀ and Lionel Rogg; his complete Reger cycle, performed in Italy in 16 recitals in 2002, was sponsored by the German Embassy and the Max Reger Institute.

Choosing the IV/109 Bruckner Organ of the Stiftsbasilika St Florian in Austria for vol.1 of this recorded odyssey, he sets out his stall uncompromisingly with the Dante-inspired Symphonic Fantasy & Fugue in D minor, op.57 ('Inferno'), the opening chords of which certainly provide some justification for a Munich critic's complaint of 'sonic and psychological perversion'; following Karl Straube's premiere performance in 1902, reviewers had complained of abused ears and frayed nerves. 'O Sancta Caecelia,' another lamented, 'Who will be able to play this and play it in the requested tempo?'

Of course, the 'requested tempo' is open to interpretation. As David Goode, himself a fine Regerian, has written, there is a school of thought that, owing to a misunderstanding of metronomes, Reger's middle-period tempo markings are too fast by a factor of two: 'Certainly, a half-speed rendition of these gives a straightforward fluency and logic to the counterpoint which is quite negated by faster playing.' Goode concludes that 'the best strategy seems to be the familiar one of finding a musical speed for the fastest passages in order to give the tempo of the whole.' In all of the eight discs under review, Roberto Marini seems to follow that admirably practical tenet.

The other sine qua non for Reger performance is clarity of

textures – this can be a taxing requirement, particularly in the many loud passages, and organists would do well to reference the sound-world of the Sauer and Walcker organs familiar to Reger, even if the Rollschweller's (general crescendo pedals) which facilitate smooth registration changes are thinner on the ground these days. For vol.2, which opens with the immense *Variations & Fugue on an Original Theme*, op.73, Marini chooses the IV/72 Sauer/Rieger organ of Fulda Cathedral; and vol.3 visits the 1957 5-manual Steinmeyer organ of Ottobeuren Basilica, in a satisfying programme which unites six of the chorale fantasias with the 14 chorale preludes op.67, but which unfortunately loses a star for slightly impaired transparency in the recording. For vol.4, Marini is at the restored (to its original sound-world) 1908 Sauer organ of the Erlöserkirche in Bad Homburg, with the Introduction, Passacaglia & Fugue in E minor, op.127, and three collections, including op.145 with its liturgical tone-poems: *Dankpsalm*, *Weihnachten*, etc and the unusual, patriotic *Siegesfeier*.

This series is characterised by Marini's total technical assurance and supreme musical taste and judgement, forged by long familiarity, which is so acutely attuned to the breadth of Reger's output, from apocalyptic, dies irae-type visions to the most tender and delicate of chorale preludes and occasional pieces. Marini's talent, combined with the choice of 'authentic' organs, must surely define Fugatto's Reger series as a benchmark of quality.

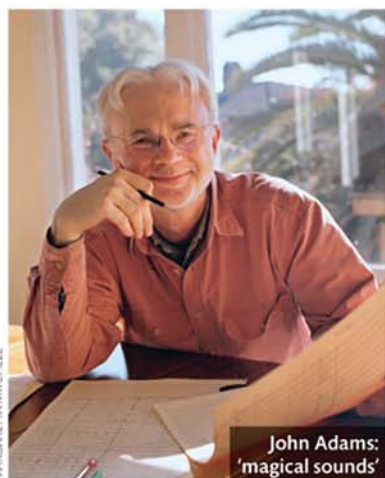
GRAEME KAY

CONCERTS

JOHN ADAMS: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OTHER MARY (EUROPEAN PREMIERE)

Kelley O'Connor (Mary), Tamara Mumford (Martha), Russell Thomas (Lazarus), Daniel Bubeck (c-t), Brian Cummings (c-t), Nathan Medley (c-t), Michael Schumacher, Anani Sanouvi, Troy Ogilvie (dancers), Los Angeles Master Chorale, Los Angeles Philharmonic / Gustavo Dudamel (dir)

16 March, Barbican Centre, London



John Adams: 'magical sounds'

As the main offering of its international residency at the Barbican, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, with the superb LA Master Chorale (singing from memory), gave a wonderfully gripping semi-staged account under Gustavo Dudamel of John Adams's latest oratorio, *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*. Designed by

Adams and his librettist/director Peter Sellars as a companion piece to *El Niño* (on the nativity), *The Other Mary* is an attempt to 'set the passion story in the eternal present, in the tradition of

sacred art', and the narrative constantly merges the biblical past with the world today. This 'simultaneity' (to use Sellars's word) – a way of fusing the 'mythical past of the Gospels with aspects of modern life' – interestingly was also a feature of a recent Austrian production of Jonathan Harvey's *Passion and Resurrection*; on several occasions I found myself thinking back to Harvey's church opera, not least to some of the vivid orchestral sounds in Part Two.

The Other Mary, as the title implies, is told from the viewpoint of Mary Magdalene, although most of the narrative is given to a trio of three counter-tenors (sometimes in quite awkward language, but very beautiful homophony). We see Mary – who has become a fighter for the poor, running a hostel for homeless women with her sister, Martha – welcome Christ into their home. He raises from the dead their brother, Lazarus (a heroic tenor for whom Adams has provided wonderful lyricism), who is revealed to be a revolutionary. The chorus singers are sometimes detached observers, sometimes angry participants, and their chief contribution, which at the Barbican also included angular gestures, is clearly modelled on the *turba* choruses in the Bach passions. Indeed, it was revealing to hear Sellars, in the pre-concert talk, refer to his work on the Passions with Simon Rattle, and how he regards the chorales as always asking questions.

The evening of 16 March proved an unforgettable experience, the performers giving a superb rendition of this massive conception. I hope that, despite the huge resources required, there will be future performances in Britain – could it be considered for a Prom? – and a further chance to hear the magical sounds of Adams's score, as well coming to grips with the profundity of the libretto.

MARTIN NEARY