



Recording

Johann Sebastian Bach: Weihnachtsoratorium

📅 December 15, 2018 👤 EMR2015 💬 0 Comments 🏷️ Choral music, Baroque

MusicaFiorita, Daniela Dolci

Gunta Smirnova, Flavio Ferri-Benedetti, Hans Jörg Mammel (Evangelist), Raitis Grigalis *SATBar*, Musica Fiorita, Daniela Dolci

142:00 (2 CDs)

PAN CLASSICS PC 10393

This is a splendid performance: beautifully balanced and recorded, with a plausible number of singers – 14, and a comparable group of players – 2.2.2.1.1 strings, admirable woodwind and the peerless Jean-François Madeuf and his cronies playing brass. The continuo includes organ, baroque guitar and theorbo (effective for example in IV.i with the pizzicato bass line), and harpsichord, played by the director, Daniela Dolci, herself a continuo specialist, but used sparingly.

The group is based in Basel, but is broadly European and both singing and playing are of a high standard. Most exciting is the ringing clarity of the tuning, following the natural harmonics of the brass players, who eschew corrective finger holes – listen to VI.i for true harmonics. But the chief glory is the sense of ensemble singing in the 12-voice choruses. Not quite all those who sing the arias also sing in the choruses. The tenor is the excellent Hans Jörg Mammel with beautifully paced narrative and magical high notes fading into the ether; the soprano is Gunta Smirnova, whose voice is a treat – clean, clear and bell-like: she is clearly an accomplished ensemble singer and could well have sung in the chorus where she would blend perfectly. The alto, Flavio Ferri-Benedetti stunning in II.x, and the bass, Raitis Grigalis – wonderfully baritonish in V.v, both sing in the choruses.

Both in the choruses and in arias every part is crystal clear with a perfect balance between voice and instruments. Before they recorded the cantatas they performed them liturgically in sequence over last Christmas period, and the pacing and flow could scarcely be bettered with a completely integrated sound-world between chorus and soloists. Although the tempi are sometimes fast, as in the opening (I.i), the performances are almost always well in control – only in V.i do I sense that a slightly breathless haste can destabilise the singers when the director's hands are on the harpsichord.

I have a query about the prominent sound of the fagotto in IV.iv *Flößt, mein Heiland*. With the pizzicato violoncello and the theorbo, it seems a bit much. Although we have got used to hearing it in the bass wherever oboes are used (especially in multiple oboe numbers), Bach actually specified it only in Part I. It doesn't work for me in IV.iv, especially where there is a single oboe here. And the theorbo? I am not wholly convinced by the organ/theorbo bass line in Bach as if it were Monteverdi. And the organ? It looks in the booklet pictures and on the Youtube video like an instrument made by Gyula Vági in Budapest and certainly has a fuller sound than the small stopped flute chamber organs of a decade ago, but it was unconvincing in the decorative improvisations between the lines in II.3 which surely would have been played on a more substantial instrument.

These small cavils apart, this version must be at the top of any current or future recording of the *Weihnachtsoratorium*; this is a dramatic and effective performance and deserves to be bought and played in every household over the days of Christmas this year and for many to come.

David Stancliffe

Performance	★★★★★
Recorded sound	★★★★★
Booklet notes	★★★★☆
Overall presentation	★★★★☆
4.5 ★★★★☆	