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GRAMOPHONE

à la Gloire de Dieu

The Sixteen
BBC Philharmonic
HARRY CHRISTOPHERS
À la Gloire de Dieu represents for me a sort of personal crusade. One thing about creating my own group is that I can indulge in music that has had a profound affect on me. Two such composers form the core of this disc, Stravinsky and Poulenc.

Francis Steele, friend and founder member of The Sixteen’s bass section, reminded me of an evening early in our student days at Oxford; I sat him down in my rooms and introduced him to Leonard Bernstein’s, then new, recording of Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms. He did not know the work and I said, “you have to hear it, it’s fantastic” and “one day we’re going to do it”. Twenty five years on that is just what happened in a perfect marriage of two great ensembles, the BBC Philharmonic and The Sixteen.

As for Poulenc, he has always been a composer who fascinated me; at school, struggling with the technical difficulties of his clarinet sonata, at university, attempting to do justice to his choral works – all achievable and, above all, worthwhile. Then, one day, I turned on the radio eager to hear the last work Poulenc ever wrote, his Sept Répons de Ténèbres. I was expectant but, in the end, frustrated and annoyed. I even phoned the BBC to complain! Had no-one listened to this recording before transmitting it – it was quite simply a travesty. From that moment, I was determined one day to redress the balance.

And so this is the result; a recording born out of idealism and youthful exuberance.

CHARLES IVES (1874-1954)
The Unanswered Question

“A Contemplation of a Serious Matter” or “The Unanswered Perennial Question” – “A Cosmic Sometime Landscape”; thus too at various times did Ives name this piece. Though Yale-educated, Charles inherited from his father an utter lack of preconception as to how music should be, the most vernacular, natural, popular material-hymns, brass bands, rag-time, horses’ hooves on cobbles – jostling in his mind and his music with increasingly transcendent, philosophical issues. ‘The Unanswered Question’ deals with the deepest question of all, which had preoccupied Ives since his father’s death in 1894. According to Ives’ own detailed ‘Notes to the Performers’, this ‘Perennial Question of Existence’ is intoned by the trumpet, while the ‘hunt for “The Invisible Answer”’ is undertaken by ‘the flutes and other human beings’, each time more agitated. Meanwhile the (off-stage) strings continue on their impassive way, representing “The Silences of the Druids – who Know, See and Hear Nothing”. Silence, while signifying sleep and death, also contains the possibility of a response, is in a sense fraught with sound; conversely, it requires the original genius of Ives to convey a truly other-worldly silence by means of music.

SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)
Agnus Dei

When Leonard Bernstein died, one of the tributes broadcast was his own recording of Samuel Barber’s ‘Adagio’ with the New York Philharmonic, a performance of electric slowness. The music originated in 1936 as the 2nd movement of Barber’s 1st String Quartet. Immediately convinced of its viability as a separate piece, he transcribed it for string orchestra; in the 1960s he returned to it again, setting it to the words ‘Agnus Dei’ from the Latin mass, and sacrificing none of its elegiac power.
IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)

Symphony of Psalms
(1930, rev. 1948)

Stravinsky was born and brought up in Russia, in a strict Orthodox faith, to which he returned in 1926, rediscovering the religious depths of his nature. Soon after he received a commission from Koussevitsky for a work for the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s 50th anniversary. The idea of composing in symphonic form appealed to Stravinsky, whose previous large-scale works had been dramatic, and the combination of his re-found faith with the publisher’s request for ‘something popular’ gave him the theme needed to avoid the problem of the to him unappealing ‘symphonic tradition’. He set verses from the Psalms, initially in Slavonic but soon changing to Latin, this being the most universal (spoken, or sung) language he could find.

The degree to which by this stage in his career Stravinsky was totally his own master is immediately clear from the symphony’s scoring. In a subtle tribute to an orchestra whose admirers might find it hard to say whether the upper strings or brass are more virtuosic, he omits the former altogether, as also the clarinets, determined to avoid any gratuitously sensuous quality or any sound to blur his acute imagination. In addition he used two pianos, which combine with harp and timpani in the symphony’s haunting coda to create the sound of soft Russian bells.

When the funeral of Stravinsky, in Venice on 15 April 1971, was televised in England, this last movement was played as the gondola bore him across the lagoon to San Michelo. The ‘Symphony’ belongs to Venice, because of that city’s links with Byzantium, and the music’s ritualistic, hieratic timelessness - constructed as it is from glittering fragments like the mosaics of St Mark’s, as well as long, simply inflected vocal phrases as objective and calm as the gaze of an icon, exemplifying Stravinsky’s dedication, ‘à la gloire de DIEU’.

SIR MICHAEL TIPPETT (1905-1998)

Five Negro Spirituals from ‘A Child of Our Time’ (1944)

Though as moved, perplexed and horrified as any of his fellows by public events, above all the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s and its desperate sequel, Stravinsky’s characteristic artistic response was to transcend the personal, seek the universal in objectivity. Tippett’s music is a complete contrast: he dives deep into himself to seize the essential expression of the Zeitgeist, thence reaches out in compassion to the world outside. But he is also a technical master, and in his oratorio ‘A Child of Our Time’ - a reaction to the oppression and division he saw around him - he consciously used traditional Passions and oratorios as a formal basis, even down to the use of Negro spirituals in the place of the Lutheran Chorales.” (‘Moving into Aquarius’.) The spirituals, he said, “should not be thought of as congregational hymns, but as integral parts of the Oratorio”: ‘Go Down Moses’, for example, is cast as ‘A Spiritual of Anger’. The anger is not purely personal; Tippett wrote, “I felt I had to express collective feelings and that could only be done by collective tunes such as the Negro spirituals, for these tunes contain a deposit of generations of common experience.” And, ultimately positive, as his superscription Tippett writes: ‘... the darkness declares the glory of light.’
FRANCIS POULENC (1899-1963)

Sept Répons des Ténèbres (1963)

Commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, whose music director was Leonard Bernstein, ‘in Celebration of its Opening Season in the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts’, this was Poulenc’s last religious work, and his last choral. As with Stravinsky in his latter years, these were categories which had increasingly occupied Poulenc since his return to his native Catholic faith in the 30s. First approached about the New York commission in early 1960, Poulenc began with some apprehension on entering ‘les ténèbres’, as he wrote to Pierre Bernac in September, a little later remarking that his first ‘répons’, rather to his surprise, was “more Mantegna than Zurbaran” - more realistic and tragic than sentimental. In March ’62 he told Bernac, “I have finished ‘les Ténèbres’... I think it is beautiful and I do not regret having taken all this time over it... With the ‘Gloria’ and the ‘Stabat’ I think I have three good religious works. May they spare me a few days of purgatory, if I do narrowly avoid going to hell.” Yet Poulenc had only just delivered the corrected proofs to his publisher when he died, of a heart attack, on 30 January 1963; ‘Sept Répons’ was first performed in April of that year. This is, above all, liturgical before it is concert music. With his slight chronological re-ordering of the Holy Week texts, the ‘Répons’ emerges as a Passion, narrative alternating with reflection, ending like Bach’s ‘St John’ with the burial of Christ and a ‘final chorus’ of hope even if, too, of typical Poulenc ambiguity. Harmonic ambiguity, not spiritual: Poulenc tried always to give “an impression of fervour, and above all of humility ... essentially direct and, if I dare say it, familiar ...” Stravinsky once wrote to Poulenc, “You are truly good, and that is what I find again and again in your music.”

NICOLAS ROBERTSON

SAMUEL BARBER

Agnus Dei

SOPRANO
Fiona Clarke, Sophie Daneman,
RUTH DEAN, Nicola Jenkin,
Nicola Jane-Kemp, Carys Lane

ALTO
Philip Newton, Nigel Short,
Helen Templeton, Caroline Trevor

TENOR
Philip Daggett, Duncan MacKenzie,
Thomas Phillips, Nicolas Robertson

BASS
Simon Birchall, Michael Bundy,
Roger Cleverdon, Timothy Jones

FRANCIS POULENC

Sept Répons des Ténèbres+

SOPRANO
Caroline Ashton, Fiona Clarke,
Libby Crabtree, Sally Dunkley,
Nicola Jenkin, Carys Lane,
Rebecca Outram, Katie Pringle

ALTO
Sally Bruce-Payne, Andrew Giles,
Michael Lees, Philip Newton,
Christopher Royall, Susanna Spicer

TENOR
John Bowen**, Andrew Carwood**+,
Simon Davies, Neil MacKenzie+++,
David Roy+++*, Angus Smith,
Matthew Vine, Andrew Wicks

BASS
Simon Birchall, Robert Evans,
Charles Gibbs, Thomas Hunt,
Timothy Jones, Francis Steele

The Sixteen
BBC Philharmonic
HARRY CHRISTOPHERS


Samuel Barber
Agnus Dei
Qui tollis peccata mundi, Miserere nobis, Dona nobis pacem.

O Lamb of God
Who takes away the sins of the world, Have mercy upon us, Grant us peace

I waited patiently for the Lord: and he inclined unto me and heard me calling. He brought me also out of the horrible pit, out of the mire and clay: and set my feet upon the rock and ordered my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth: even a thanksgiving unto our Cod. Many shall see it and fear: and shall put their trust in the Lord. (Psalm 40 v.1-4)

Igor Stravinsky
Symphony Of Psalms

Hear my prayer o Lord and with thine ears consider my calling. Hold not thy peace at my tears. For I am a stranger with thee: and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. o spare me a little, that I may recover my strength: before I go hence, and be no more seen. (Psalm 39 v.13-15)
SIR MICHAEL TIPPETT
Five Negro Spirituals from
‘A Child of Our Time’

Steal Away
Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus;
a steal away, steal away home,
I han’t got long to stay here.
My Lord, He calls me, He calls me by the thunder
The trumpet sounds within my soul
I han’t got long to stay here.
Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus;
a steal away, steal away home,
I han’t got long to stay here.

Nobody knows
Nobody knows the trouble I see, Lord
Nobody knows like Jesus.
a brothers, pray for me, and
help me to drive old Satan away, Lord.
a mothers, pray for me, and
help me to drive old Satan away, Lord.
Nobody knows the trouble I see, Lord
Nobody knows like Jesus.

Go down, Moses
Go down, Moses
Way down in Egypt land;
Tell old Pharoah
To let my people go.
When Israel was in Egypt land
Oppressed so hard
They could not stand,
“Thus spake the Lord”
bold Moses said,
“If not, I’ll smite your first-born dead”
Go down, Moses.

By and by
by and by, by and by,
I’m going to lay down my heavy load.
I know my robe’s going to fit me well
I’ve tried it on at the gates of Hell.
Hell is deep and a dark despair
o stop, poor sinner and don’t go there!
by and by, by and by,
I’m going to lay down my heavy load.

Deep River
Deep river, my home is over Jordan.
Lord, I want to cross over into camp ground.
a chillun!
o don’t you want to go to that gospel feast,
That promised land,
That land where all is peace.
Walk into heaven, and take my seat
And cast my crown at Jesus’ feet.
Deep river, my home is over Jordan.
Lord, I want to cross over into camp ground.

Steal Away
Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus;
a steal away, steal away home,
I han’t got long to stay here.
My Lord, He calls me, He calls me by the thunder
The trumpet sounds within my soul
I han’t got long to stay here.
Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus;
a steal away, steal away home,
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Nobody knows
Nobody knows the trouble I see, Lord
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a brothers, pray for me, and
help me to drive old Satan away, Lord.
a mothers, pray for me, and
help me to drive old Satan away, Lord.
Nobody knows the trouble I see, Lord
Nobody knows like Jesus.
I. Una hora non potuistis vigilare mecum
(Maundy Thursday)
Una hora non potuistis vigilare mecum, qui exhortabamini mori pro me?
Vel ludam non videtis, quomodo non dormit,
sed festinat tradere me Judaeis?
Quid dormitis?
surgite, et orate, ne intretis in tentationem.

II. Judas mercator pessimus
(Maundy Thursday)
Judas mercator pessimus osculo
petit Dominum: ille ut agnus innocens non negavit Judae osculum:
Denariorum numero
Christum Judaeis tradidit. Melius illi erat
si natus non fuisset.

III. Jesum tradidit
(Good Friday)
Jesum tradidit impius summis principibus
sacerdotum, et senioribus populi:
Petrus autem sequebatur eum a longe,
ut videret finem.
Adduxerunt autem eum ad Caipham
principem sacerdotum, ubi scribæ et
pharisaei convenerant.

IV. Caligaverunt oculi mei
(Good Friday)
Caligaverunt oculi mei a fletu meo:
quia elongatus est a me, qui consolabatur me:
Videte, omnes populi, si est dolor similis
sicut dolor meus.
o vos omnes, qui transitis per viam,
attendite et videte.

V. Tenebrae factae sunt
(Good Friday)
Tenebrae factae sunt,
dum crucifixissent Jesum Judaei:
et circa horam nonam
exclamavit Jesus voce magna:
Deus meus, ut quid me dereliquisti?
Et inclinato capite, emisit spiritum.
Exclamans Jesus voce magna aiit:
Pater in manus tuas
commendo spiritum meum.
VI. Sepulto Domino
(Holy Saturday)
Sepulto Domino,
signatum est monumentum,
volventes lapidem ad ostium monument:
Ponentes milites, qui custodirent ilium.
Accedentes principes sacerdotum ad Pilatum,
petierunt ilium.

When the Lord was buried,
they sealed up the tomb,
rolling a stone before the entrance to the
sepulchre: placing soldiers to guard it.
The chief priests went to Pilate
and petitioned him.

VII. Ecce quomodo moritur Justus
(Holy Saturday)
Ecce quomodo moritur Justus,
et nemo percipit corde:
et viri justi tolluntur,
et nemo considerat:
sublatus est Justus:
Et erit in pace memoria eius.
Tamquam agnus coram tondente se
obmutuit,
et non aperuit os suum:
de angustia,
et de judicio sublatus est.

Behold how the just man dies,
and no one takes it to heart;
and just men are taken away,
and no one cares about it:
the just man has been taken away
from the face of iniquity:
and his memory shall be in peace.
He was as mute as a lamb before the shearer,
and he opened not his mouth:
he was taken away from anguish
and from judgement.