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Zoltán GÁRDONYI (1906-1986)

Ende September [5:12]
Reggeli hat óra [1:36]
Du schöner Lebensbaum des Paradieses [1:38]
Danklied der Erlösten (Psalm 107) [2:56]
Singet dem Herren (Psalm 96) [0:57]
Finnisches Busslied [2:19]
Der Herr ist mein Hirte (Psalm 23) [3:30]
God is our Refuge (Psalm 46) [4:18]
Szívemnek kösziklája (Psalm 73) [2:03]
Áldott legyen az Istennek neve [3:36]
Élet és békesség [9:21]

Zsolt GÁRDONYI (b. 1946)

Somebody's Knockin' at Your Door [2:22]
Just a Closer Walk with Thee [2:45]
Erd und Himmel sollen singen [2:07]
Encore [2:04]
Singin' wid a Sword in Ma' Han', Lord [2:18]
Valse Triste [2:53]
Erdő, erdő, erdő [1:11]
Vom Himmel hoch, o Engel, kommt [2:13]
Ein Tag vor dem Herrn [2:26]
Der Mond ist aufgegangen [2:58]
Stille Nacht [3:18]

Cantabile Regensburg/Matthias Beckert

rec. 2016, Dominikanerinnenkirche, Adlersberg / Regensburg, Germany

BECORD [Total time 66:04]

Some years ago, when I was working for an orchestra in Asia which employed a disproportionate number of expatriate Hungarian musicians, I decided to plan a programme of Hungarian music which avoided the usual suspects – Bartók, Kodály, Dohnányi, Eötvös, Kurtág, Ligeti and, of course, Liszt. As an organist I had in my repertory the splendid jazz-infused *Mozart Changes* by Zsolt Gárdonyi, and one of the musicians put us in touch and I asked whether he might have anything suitable to put in our concert. A charming correspondence ensued, the net result being a plethora of scores by both Zsolt and his father Zoltán with permission to perform them. He even sent me a couple of privately-produced CDs of their music, including orchestral, organ and choral pieces, nearly all of which I felt were works of great distinction. Since then I have played *Mozart Changes* more often (and more badly) than I care to remember, but I have heard very few other performances and come across very few commercial recordings of other music by the two Gárdonyis, so this CD devoted to choral pieces by both father and son comes as a hugely welcome release.

And, while the music is lovely – more of that shortly – it is hugely elevated by some delicious singing from Cantabile Regensburg under their inspirational director, Matthias Beckert. Not to put too fine a point on it, the singing is divine, beautifully measured, impeccably controlled and gorgeously detailed. It oozes musicality; it is difficult to imagine this music being better served by any choral group. From the very first track – Zoltán's setting of a lengthy text by Sándor Petőfi's *Ende September* – which leaps, often quite unexpectedly, from one idea to another and from one musical style to another, Beckert exerts tight control, and the choir responds with impressive immediacy.

There are 11 different pieces here by Zoltán Gárdonyi, ranging in length from the tiny (less than a minute), rhythmically energised setting of Psalm 96 (*Singet dem Herren*), to the extended *Élet és békesség*, with its crisply articulated unison opening and its subsequent passage through often quite chromatic musical pathways. Zoltán's musical style is varied if conservative, ranging from the rigidly contrapuntal (*Danklied der Erlösten*), to the richly harmonic *God is our Refuge*, and all are clearly driven by the texts, not so much the meaning as the shape of the words, and clearly the language used is of importance to Gárdonyi's approach.

There is no likelihood of the unprepared listener not knowing when we move from father to son; the change of gear is obvious. But this excellent choral group takes the stylistic change easily in its stride and the performances of the 11 pieces by Zsolt Gárdonyi are every bit as neat, tidy, precise and convincing as those by Zoltán. With a perky piano accompaniment, brightly played by Maria Saulich, the Zsolt segment kicks off with the first of three spiritual arrangements – *Somebody's Knockin'* – which is characterised by a warm, jazz-feel to the harmonies, and a delightfully buoyant feel to the jaunty rhythmic character of the original.

Interestingly, while the first two spiritual arrangements are in English, Zsolt looks to a German text, from two different authors, for the third (*Erd und Himmel sollen singen*). These spiritual arrangements are followed by a short piece simply called *Encore*, which is a wordless piece for eight-part choir written especially for Cantabile Regensburg and Matthias Beckert. It would be quite right to say that they all ease themselves into this luxuriously harmonised musical moment, with its tiny hints of the old Swingle sound, with a great sense of ownership; but they do that to everything on this CD, and *Encore* proves to be just another example of a very fine choir at the top of their game in music which is readily approachable and eminently listenable-to.

Despite his obvious penchant for jazz and impressionistic musical styles, Zsolt Gárdonyi has a real feel for what works well with a choir, and while much of his music is characterised by a lightness of feel and a cheerful countenance, he is capable of writing highly effective music in a more serious vein. This is well exemplified by the *Valse Triste*, a setting of verses by Sándor Weöres which look at the idea of impermanence through the “atmospheric symbols of autumn”, as Gárdonyi puts it in his own booklet note. The piece includes some choral whispering and, as such, is the only piece in the entire programme to venture into the ground of what we might vaguely describe as “unconventional” choral behaviour.

Ein Tag vor dem Herrn, setting words from the Second Epistle of St Peter, is rather dark, but gloriously effective, while words from the 18th century poet Matthias Claudius, inspire the most gorgeously luxurious music in *Der Mond ist aufgegangen*. Two real gems for Christmastide are the delightfully swinging *Vom Himmel hoch, o Engel, kommt* and an enchanting setting of *Stille Nacht* which, at a shade over three minutes, deserves to be in the repertory of every choir next time Christmas comes along.

Marc Rochester