

VIRTUOSE CHORMUSIK. The Stockholm Radio Choir, and the Stockholm Chamber Choir, Eric Ericson, director.

André Jolivet: Epithaleme (1953) (for vocal orchestra in twelve parts); Francis Poulenc: Sept Chansons; Frank Martin: Ariel Choruses from Shakespeare's "Tempest"; Mass; Richard Strauss: Der Abend; Die Götter im Putzzimmer; Olivier Messiaen: Cinq Rechants; Luigi Dallapiccola: Due Cori di Michelangelo Buonarroti; Ildebrando Pizzetti: Tre Composizioni corali; Lars Edlund: Elegie; Claudio Monteverdi: Lagrima d'amante al sepolcro dell'amata; Thomas Tallis: Spem in alium.
EMI Electrola 1C 165-30 796/99 (4 discs)

This is the second four-disc release to come from this prestigious German company and this equally prestigious Swedish choral director. The first set, Europäische Chormusik, gave us first recordings of virtuosic choral works of Strauss, Henk Badings, Poulenc, Ligeti, and Pizzetti, as well as items that are fairly often recorded. The recent issue, Virtuose Chormusik, includes items which, presumably because of their difficulty, have not made it to disc before now. With this conductor and these professional singers, the harder and more demanding the composition, the better.

Just glancing at the contents of this set, one would assume that this effort is going to be a tour-de-force, and considering the past efforts of these choirs under Ericson, the availability of hitherto unrecorded works might be justification for investing money in this expensive set. Unfortunately, the works that are new to disc, the Martin Ariel Choruses, the Strauss Götter im Putzzimmer, Pizzetti Tre Composizioni, and Edlund Elegie just aren't very interesting compositions, well performed as they are here. The Jolivet Epithaleme has been recorded once before by Pathé under the composer's direction, a recording I have seen and not heard. It is the weakest piece in the set, and just not worth the effort of performing or hearing.

Virtuose Chormusik falls short on one other count. The German EMI engineers have done an unusually haphazard job of splicing in several places in an otherwise beautifully recorded set.

Both Ericson's choirs sing superbly, and really are virtuoso instruments with impeccable diction in French, German, Italian, Latin, and even English. Their tone quality is typically continental - pure head tone from the sopranos, an almost white tone favored by the German and English choirs, with just enough color from the other voices to keep the ears from suffering too much. When it comes to calling forth different colors as demanded by the music, they can readily do so, as in the Monteverdi and Poulenc works.

In some of the works recorded here, I prefer other accounts. In the Tallis work, I find the Willcocks recording (Argo) still the finest available, with the Clerkes of Oxenford (Classics for Pleasure/Seraphim)

a close second. The Dallapiccola work as performed by the Monteverdi Choir of Hamburg (Telefunken) is preferable to Ericson's, and the Deller Consort's account of the Monteverdi "Sestina" (Vanguard) unbeatable.

The Strauss Der Abend alone is worth the price of the set. Not only is it more flexible and involved than the Heinrich Schütz Choir's recording under Roger Norrington (Argo), but I have been convinced by Ericson that this work is a great piece of music, not performed because of the orchestral demands that Strauss makes on the singers. Witness the opening of the work, with the sopranos strung out on high A for two pages! Strauss asks for, and gets from this choir, a seamless stream of sound. The Martin Mass, an early (1922), suppressed work, is better performed here than in the recording by the Wartburg (Iowa) College Choir, directed by James Fritschel (Musical Heritage Society), a recording that led me to believe that the composer was justified in withholding its publication for fifty years.

Virtuose Chormusik as a set is not quite as successful as the earlier effort by the Swedish choirs, but I would not wish to see an end to this admirable project, if it indeed is one. There are dozens of worthy works that need exposure and documentation like this, and if this organization continues with what promises to be a survey of choral literature, we listeners, choral directors and audio buffs are in for a real treat.

Michael Donaldson