

Michael Haydn - Vocal & Instrumental Works (2007)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Missa Tempore Quadragesimae*, MH 553 for choir and basso continuo 2. *Sinfonia in E flat Major*, MH 340 (P17) for orchestra 3. *Ave Regina*, MH 140 for double choir 4. *Divertimento in A major*, MH 299 (P121) for string quartet 5. *Responsoria ad Matutinum in Nativitate Domini*, MH 639 for choir, violins, organo Ex Tempore/Florian Heyerick (140, 553, 639) Academia Palatina (340) Marcolini Quartett (299)

Being the son of a famous father isn't easy as Johann Sebastian Bach's sons and Domenico Scarlatti knew all too well. But being the brother of a famous composer isn't easy either. Not that Johann Michael seems to have had any problems with that, as he was apparently a very modest character who liked to stay out of the limelight. It is this which could explain the fact that so few of his compositions were published during his lifetime. But this modesty, in combination with the fame of his brother Franz Joseph, had a long-term effect on his reputation and the performance – or rather lack of it – of his oeuvre. Considering the fact that he was a man of high reputation, and was much admired by Mozart and Schubert suggests this neglect is unjustified. The problem is that people often expect the same from any composer: compositions which have a lasting influence on the course of music history. Johann Michael Haydn's compositions had not. But when one brings down one's expectations to a more reasonable level, and understands the primary function of music – especially religious music – at the time, there is a lot to enjoy. It seems nowadays that more and more performers are aware of the quality of Johann Michael's output; in recent years several recordings of his works have been released.

The present disc is a kind of overview of Johann Michael Haydn's music. It contains three sacred works - the core of his compositional output - as well as two instrumental works: a symphony, and a string quartet which Haydn called a 'divertimento'.

Most of his life was spent working in Salzburg. The setting of the Ave Regina is an early work

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from Salzburg written for double choir in the 'stile antico'. This reflects the influence of Johann Josef Fux, who was working at the Austrian imperial court and was famous for his treatise on counterpoint. The two other works are from a much later date. They were written in the 1790s when Johann Michael worked in Salzburg under archbishop Colloredo. His radical liturgical reforms caused a split with Mozart, but Haydn stayed at his post and made the most of it. Colloredo wanted liturgical music to be rather short and not too complicated and virtuosic, and that is exactly what these two compositions are. They are predominantly homophonic, and avoid solo passages. That doesn't mean that this music is for easy listening: there is enough variety to keep the listener's attention, and Haydn doesn't ignore text expression. The best example is the setting of the 'Crucifixus' from the Mass, which contains some very strong dissonance.

The choir sings the vocal works admirably, with the appropriate light touch, but without overlooking the more expressive passages. The instrumentalists give good support: basso continuo in the Mass, with two additional violins in the Responsorium. Only part of the text of these Responsorium is sung. I can't figure out whether Haydn's settings are performed in part here or whether the booklet gives a longer text than Haydn has set.

The symphony is a very nice work to listen to. It is difficult to understand why a piece has not joined the standard repertoire of chamber orchestras, not even period instrument ensembles. It is to be hoped that one day that will change. Equally good is the divertimento, which is certainly no worse than many other string quartets from the classical period. Both the Academia Palatina and the Marcolini Quartet – consisting of members of Concerto Köln – give lively and colourful performances. It is a shame that the symphony has been recorded in a church, whereas the other works have been recorded in the studio. In regard to acoustics I would have liked it to be the other way round, as the symphony suffers a little from the too large reverberation.

The booklet contains a good essay on Johann Michael, in which Florian Heyerick puts the man and his music in their proper historical context. His disc is certainly for those music lovers who are willing to open their ears to music which didn't – and doesn't - shake the world. ---Johan van Veen, musicweb-international.com

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