Wolf-Ferrari - Talitha Kumi, La passione & 8 Cori (2018)

Talitha Kumi (La figlia di Giairo), Op. 3 *1. Pt. 1, Et cum transcendisset Jesus 16:49 2. Pt. 2, Et non admisit 17:09 3. La Passione, Op. 21 2:53* 8 Cori, Op. 2
4. No. 1, Madrigale 2:01 5. No. 2, Canto No. 1 2:59 6. No. 3, Canto No. 2 2:11 7. No. 4, Frottola 0:50 8. No. 5, Die Lehre 1:03 9. No. 6, Stornello 1:04 10. No. 7, Rispetto 2:43 11. No. 8, Quartina 1:33
Rainer Trost (Evangelist) - tenor (1,2) Joan Martín-Royo (Jairus, Christus) - baritone (1,2) Oviedo Filarmonía (1,2) Coro El León de Oro (Choir) Friedrich Haider - conductor

Before he sprang to international fame as an operatic composer, Wolf-Ferrari had embarked on an important sequence of choral works. The very early Otto cori, Op. 2, set to Italian and German texts, contain some of the most beautiful music he ever wrote, revealing his love of Italian Renaissance music through grace, bucolic melancholy, humorous wit and sublime characterisation. In Talitha Kumi!, Op. 3, the title derived from an Aramaic quotation from Mark's Gospel, the voice of an Evangelist carries the biblical narrative of Jesus bringing the daughter of Jairus back to life against a rich orchestral backdrop. ---chandos.net

Within three years of Wolf-Ferrari's death the authors of The Record Guide felt able to describe him as "a composer of slender but genuine talent", who would be remembered chiefly for a few orchestral excerpts from his mainly comic operas. And that was pretty much the concensus view that prevailed for many years, until in the 1980s and 1990s the Marco Polo label and its bargain offshoot Naxos began to explore the forgotten byways of music, and lighted on the considerable output of Wolf-Ferrari that had remained untouched for years by the record companies. The bald statement by The Record Guide that the Italian-German composer had

written only “two operas on more serious subjects” was expanded and contradicted by the remarkable discovery of the German-language Das Himmelskleid; two alternative recordings appeared of his pseudo-Shakespearean Sly (although neither appear as currently available on Arkiv Music, second-hand copies – for once reasonably priced – are listed on Amazon). We have also been presented with a selection from Wolf-Ferrari’s concert music, which again is far from negligible and displays much more than simply a “slender” talent.

But apart from a solitary issue of Wolf-Ferrari’s beautiful Dante oratorio La vita nuova on Koch (also apparently currently deleted, although second-hand copies remain available), the composer’s choral music has been comprehensively neglected, until this belated release of a recording made in 2010. Indeed all the works on this CD are advertised as “world première recordings” and the enthusiastic writer in the booklet describes the eight Op.2 choruses as containing “some of the most beautiful music he ever wrote.” And the inclusion here of Talitha Kumi! means that, of Wolf-Ferrari’s three major works for chorus and orchestra, only the “biblical cantata” La Sulamite remains unrepresented on record. (Like the setting here on the subject of the raising of the daughter of Jairus, it features a text in Latin, and since it is fairly short it could probably have been accommodated on this disc.)

In Wilde’s Salome one of the Nazarenes makes reference to the story of the Jairus’s daughter as having been raised from death (originally given in St Mark’s gospel), leading Herod to issue an edict forbidding anyone to raise the dead, which “would be terrible”; but in fact Nazarene has get his message wrong, since the original text makes it abundantly clear that the girl in question is in a coma, near death indeed but capable of being awakened from sleep despite the scepticism of the bystanders. The miracle is here briefly related, with none of the circumstantial detail that is found in the similar story of Lazarus elsewhere in the gospels; in order to create a musical work of any substance Wolf-Ferrari found it necessary to add two Latin hymns for the chorus as well as a good deal of extensive orchestral description of atmosphere and landscape, where the voice of the tenor evangelist assumes much more prominence than either Jairus or Jesus himself. But this music, some of it beautifully atmospheric if rather conventionally pastoral, effectively robs the narrative of any forwardly dramatic impulse, which it might otherwise have possessed. The calm reaction of Christ to the report of the girl “at the point of death” is totally lacking in any sense of urgency, leading to an unworthy but nagging suspicion that he is quite willing to delay any action until rigor mortis has incontestably set in; nor is there any sense of command or authority in the setting of the Aramaic words “Talitha Kumi!” (Daughter, arise!) despite the resonant delivery of the line by Joan Martin-Royo. The elegant and poised Rainer Trost is excellent as the evangelist, rising to the limited dramatic opportunies which he is afforded; but the most gripping section of music comes unexpectedly in the second part where Jesus’s entry into the house is suddenly presented as a parallel to Wagnerian Montsalvat, with the orchestra closely echoing phrases from the transformation music from Act One of Parsifal (track 2, 3.20). Otherwise the best music is to be found in the Latin hymns which close each part, delicate and hushed – and with an unexpectedly prolonged ending – but again lacking in any of the sense of operatic involvement that we associate with (for example) Verdi in

Italian religious music of this period.

In the unaccompanied choral music that fills up the disc there are indeed some passages of sublime beauty. Most of these come in the various settings of Tuscan folk poetry – including the somewhat later setting of La Passione, although the opus number here is misleading, since the anonymous booklet note informs us that the work was not published until three decades after its composition. The treatment of the “Tuscan folk verse” Rispetto is particularly beautiful, with its wordless cantilena phrases and a delightfully poised contribution from an unjustly uncredited solo soprano. I am not at all convinced that the eight choruses form any sort of unified cycle, including as they do a German-language cautionary tale by Heinrich Heine as well as a couple of frankly comic Italian numbers, which contrast strangely with the more restrained setting of Michelangelo’s Madrigal and Goldoni’s wistfully nostalgic Quartetto; but it is a pleasure to hear them, and they are superbly sung here by a choir whose tuning is never suspect even in some of the more chromatic passages (not that anything here is even vaguely expressionist in a manner that might be regarding as anticipating any of the elements in Wolf-Ferrari’s verismo operas to come). Friedrich Haider sets off the mood of each setting with admirable involvement – the booklet informs us that he is “an ardent champion of the music of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari,” and one can well believe it. My only regret is that this disc could not have also provided us with a première recording of La Sulamite, which a reading of the vocal score suggests might be a more involving work than The daughter of Jairus written at much the same time.

Texts and translations are not included in the booklet (the notes come in English and German) but they are available online; they are well presented there, and listeners will find them essential if the music is to be given the opportunity to make its proper effect. Admirers of the music of Wolf-Ferrari – and the growing size of his representation in the catalogue confirms that there a good many of them out there – will need no recommendation to acquire this excellently performed and well-presented disc. One would also like to encounter one or another of the Tuscan settings for unaccompanied chorus in choral recitals, where I am sure that audiences would find them immediately engaging. ---Paul Corfield Godfrey, musicweb-international.com

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