Georg Muffat - Missa in labore requies (2013)

- Sonata 1:04 - Kyrie: Kyrie 1:36 - Kyrie: Christe 0:59 - Kyrie: Kyrie II 1:48 - Gloria: Gloria 1:18 - Gloria: Laudamus te 2:01 - Gloria: Gratias agimus - Gloria: Domine Deus 1:09 - Gloria: Qui tollis 4:13 - Gloria: Quoniam 2:03 - Gloria: Cum Sancto Spiritu - Credo: Credo 1:19 - Credo: Et in unum Dominum 3:17 - Credo: Qui propter nos homines 2:08 - Credo: Et incarnatus est 1:03 - Credo: Crucifixus 2:03 - Credo: Et resurrexit 1:49 - Credo: Et in Spiritum Sanctum 4:58 - Sanctus: Sanctus 2:19 - Sanctus: Hosanna 1:48 - Sanctus: Benedictus 1:05 - Sanctus: Hosanna 1:49 - Agnus Dei: Agnus Dei 2:16 - Agnus Dei: Dona nobis 1:31 Ars Antiqua Austria Florianer Sängerknaben Gunar Letzbor – conductor Domkerk Utrecht - Festival Oude Muziek 23 august 2013

In 1724 François Couperin published a collection of instrumental works under the title Les Goûts-Réünis. This title was programmatic as he was an advocate of the 'mixed taste', the blending of elements of the French and Italian styles. In Germany various composers did the same: they incorporated them into what had come down to them by tradition. These ideals were of a strictly artistic nature and were seldom specified. The first advocate of the 'mixed taste' was Georg Muffat. He not only explained this approach in the prefaces to his publications but was also quite clear that his motivation was political. "The warlike weapons and their causes are far from me; the notes, strings, and lovely musical sounds are my daily preoccupation, and as I mix the French style with that of the Germans and the Italians, I don't make war but probably give to those people an example of desired harmony and sweet peace".

Many composers who were in favour of the mixed taste knew the different styles only through music publications or manuscripts. Neither Couperin nor Telemann ever set foot in Italy. The latter visited France, but Bach never left his own region. It was different with Muffat: he had firsthand experience of both styles. He was of Scottish ancestry, but was born in Savoy where his family had settled in the early 17th century. As a boy he went to Alsace, and then to Paris, where he studied with Lully. He worked in Strasbourg, studied in Bavaria, and then worked in Vienna, Salzburg and Prague. In the 1680s he went to Rome, where he studied with Bernardo

Pasquini and became acquainted with the oeuvre of Corelli. He ended his career in Passau. Despite his experiences in France and Italy he considered himself German. Therefore he is probably the ideal of a musician who could blend the various stylistic influences he experienced during his career.

It is through his instrumental music that the ideals of the mixed taste were disseminated. He composed very little vocal music. Benedict Anton Aufschnaiter, who succeeded him as Kapellmeister at the court in Passau, stated that Muffat "left behind no more than three Masses, an Offertory and two Salve Reginas (...)". Only one Mass has come down to us, the Missa in labore requies which is the subject of the present disc. It is in the tradition of large-scale festal masses which we know also from other composers working in Austria, and in particular in Salzburg. A striking example is the 64-part Missa Salisburgensis, today attributed to Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber. In comparison this Mass, also written for Salzburg, is more modest in its proportions, but it is still in 24 parts, divided over five vocal and instrumental choirs. Especially notable is the choir of five trumpets and timpani. Also remarkable are the virtuosic parts for two cornetts and the soloistic treatment of the violins.

Obviously the main feature of a Mass like this is its splendour. However, in the passages where the trumpets and cornetts are silent there is certainly room for text expression. A notable example is in the opening section of the Gloria, where the word "pax" (peace) is given special treatment as it is repeated several times in various voices. Considering the quotation given in the first paragraph of this review that can hardly be accidental. The 'Crucifixus' is another eloquent specimen where the text is illustrated through musical figures and harmonic progressions. The opening figures are played with strong accents, as if the scourging of Jesus at the cross is being exposed. When the trumpets are involved in the proceedings their parts are treated with differentiation, for instance in the Credo when they play with mutes on the words "passus et sepultus est" (suffered and was buried), "et mortuos" (the dead) and "(resurrectionem) mortuorum" ([the resurrection] of the dead).

In his "Observations from the Podium" Gunar Letzbor explains how difficult it is to perform this work. "All these efforts to create a universal musical experience in sound were for the benefit of only a small elite, namely the archbishop and his co-celebrants, who found themselves at the sonic centre of the spatially distributed musical choirs. Just a few metres away from the centre one noticed disturbing acoustic overlaps; from greater distances the performance became so diffuse that it must have been difficult to find anything positive about it". This must have consequences for the way a work like this Mass is recorded. Letzbor believes that it is only possible by making use of modern technical possibilities, but realizes that not every music-lover has the equipment to reveal everything as it has been recorded. Another matter of concern is the venue where the recording has to take place. In his view the cathedral in Gurk has the acoustic conditions of Salzburg Cathedral, and here various experiments were made until he

was satisfied with the results.

According to Aufschnaiter Muffat regretted that he did not compose more sacred music. Listening to this Mass one can only agree. That makes a recording of the only extant sacred piece from his pen all the more welcome. It is not the first time this work has appeared on disc: in 1999 Harmonia mundi released a recording by Cantus Cölln. I don't know whether that one is still available. --- Johan van Veen, musicweb-international.com

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