

Masterpieces of Portuguese Polyphony (1986/2005)

Written by bluesever

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Duarte Lobo Missa Pro Defunctis, For Eight Voices 1.*Introitus* 6:15 2.*Kyrie* 2:16
3.*Graduale* 3:33 4.*Offertorium* 3:33 5.*Sanctus* 2:59 6.*Agnus Dei* 2:56 7.*Communio* 2:42
8.*Audivi Vocem De Caelo - Motet, For Six Voices* 3:03
Filipe de Magalhaes Missa Dilectus Meus, For Five Voices
9.*Kyrie* 4:43 10.*Gloria* 4:47 11.*Credo* 7:25 12.*Santus* 2:39 13.*Benedictus* 2:08 14.*Agnus Dei* 5:16
Commissa Mea Pavesco - Motet, For Six Voices 4:37
The William Byrd Choir Gavin Turner – conductor

Duarte Lôbo is not entirely unfamiliar, though not to be confused with his Spanish near-contemporary Alonso Lobo – the Concise Grove manages a brief entry on him – but the name Filipe de Magalhães, with no entry in Concise Grove, will be both unfamiliar and unpronounceable to most. Try holding your nose for the nasal sound of the –ães syllable and slurring the final s. The Anglicised version of the name, ‘Magellan’ is familiar as the name of the explorer. One Pedro Ayres Magalhães is a guitarist in the modern Portuguese band Madredeus; perhaps he is a descendant of Filipe.

In fact both works by Lôbo on this CD have been recorded elsewhere; at this bargain-price level the obvious comparison is with two Naxos recordings: the Schola Cantorum of Oxford directed by Jeremy Summerly have recorded the Requiem coupled with Manuel Cardoso’s Requiem on 8.550682 and Audivi vocem is on a CD entitled Portuguese Polyphony, including Magalhães’s Mass O Soberana luz (Ars Nova/Bo Holten on 8.553310).

Lôbo’s Requiem – the alternative Latin title Missa pro defunctis or Mass for the dead describes its function – is one of two which he composed, the other setting being for six voices. Both English and Portuguese music of this period would have sounded rather old-fashioned elsewhere in Europe: English music was isolated by the Reformation, Portuguese, despite the

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union with Spain, by geographical isolation and by the innate conservatism of centres such as Évora and Coímbra. As a result, both the Lôbo and the Magalhães sound more like Palestrina's or Victoria's music of the late sixteenth-century than that of their contemporary Monteverdi. Even in Lutheran Germany at this date composers like Praetorius and Schütz were influenced by Venetian and other Italian music before the 30-Years War intervened to enforce a starker style. For an idea of what English church music of the time sounded like, try the excellent recent Helios reissue of the Winchester Cathedral/David Hill CD of music by Gibbons on CDH55228.

In his booklet notes, Bruno Turner describes Lôbo's Requiem as "the kind of music that looks nothing on paper, yet in performance has great dignity and atmosphere", a description which is certainly more apt to this performance than to Summerly's. The Naxos notes stress the music's blend of skilful polyphony with more modern dissonances; the Oxford Camerata emphasise this virtuosity rather than solemnity, though theirs is also a thoughtful performance, whereas the William Byrd Choir make the music sound much more like that of the great English polyphonic composer from whom they take their name. If I describe Turner as more intense, Summerly as more scholarly, that is not to suggest that the former is an academic slouch – far from it – or that the latter makes the music seem dry.

Both interpretations are valid; the Helios is more evocative of the kind of occasion on which this music may have been used, at the incense-wreathed funeral of some dignitary – the kind of occasion depicted in El Greco's famous painting The Burial of the Count of Orgaz. If the Naxos is perhaps more evocative of the soaring perpendicular architecture of a large English church or cathedral – it was, in fact, recorded in the chapel of New College, Oxford – the Helios reminds me of the sound of hearing a Victoria setting at High Mass in Toledo Cathedral many years ago, an acoustic very similar to the large Portuguese churches of the early seventeenth century, I imagine.

On first playing the two recordings through, I had the impression that on Naxos the plainsong introduction to each section is sung at a slightly more sedate pace than on Hyperion but that otherwise Summerly tends to be a little faster than Turner. In fact, close comparison proved me wrong: Summerly is faster in the opening plainsong, too. Both are rather brisker than would have been the practice in singing plainsong in 1621. I do not wish to over-emphasise these differences, which become apparent only in close comparison; both performances sound excellent when heard on their own.

Turner follows the Requiem with another funeral piece, Audivi vocem, familiar from the Book of Common Prayer Burial Service : "I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me, Write, From henceforth blessed are the dead which die in the Lord." This motet also features on Holten's

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Naxos recording and again honours are about equal, with Holten adopting a slightly more leisurely pace than Turner.

Magalhães' penitential *Comissa mea pavesco*, also a funeral motet, is another work common to the Holten and Turner recordings. This time Holten is noticeably faster than Turner. In both works the acoustic of Kastelkirken, Copenhagen on Naxos, is appropriate to the music. The ambience of both Naxos discs is rather more open than that on the Helios, though this is fully acceptable within its own terms.

So far as I am aware, there is no other current recording of Magalhães' *Mass Dilectus meus*. I cannot imagine a better performance than Turner's. As the title suggests, it follows the common renaissance practice whereby the cantus firmus is based on another piece of music – in this case, presumably, a (now lost) Marian motet with words from the Song of Songs, a practice dating back to the fifteenth century, which would have seemed as old-fashioned elsewhere in Europe as the continuing composition in England, well into the seventeenth century, of polyphonic instrumental pieces based on the in nomine of Taverner's *Missa Trinitatis* from a century before.

I may have made this music sound too dry and academic when nothing could be further from the truth. That the music would have sounded old-fashioned by comparison with Monteverdi hardly impedes its enjoyment by a modern audience: anyone who likes Palestrina, Victoria or Byrd will be thoroughly at home here and should enjoy these performances immensely. Heard on a quiet evening, this music is as close to heaven as most of us are likely to get.

Those who wish to explore Portuguese polyphony further might well start with the two fine Naxos CDs, even though it involves some duplication. If you must choose either the Helios or the Naxos version of the Lôbo Requiem, the deciding factor may be your preference for another contemporary composer's Requiem (on Naxos) or a contemporary mass in more cheerful vein on Helios. (Not that either Cardoso's or Lôbo's *Missa pro defunctis* is any more lugubrious than Fauré's Requiem since, like him, neither sets the terrifying sequence *Dies iræ*.) Unusually for Naxos, the Lôbo/Cardoso CD has very brief notes and no texts. The other Naxos disc, like the Helios, contains full texts and translations and a helpful set of notes: as with other Helios reissues these are at least as complete as those on the original full-price issue.

Otherwise I note that Hyperion have just reissued a further disc of Portuguese polyphony with the Westminster Cathedral Choir under James O'Donnell, containing music by Cardoso, Rebelo

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and de Cristo (CDH55229). I have not heard this CD in its previous incarnation but, from knowledge of the performers in similar repertoire, I cannot imagine anyone being disappointed by it: I hope to offer a review of it in the near future. In fact, you could buy the two Helios reissues and both the Naxos discs for not much more than the cost of one premium-price CD.

Alternatively a bargain-price Gimell 2-CD set (CDGIM205) combines performances by the Tallis Scholars of the Cardoso and Lôbo Requiems with music by Alonso Lobo and Victoria, thus providing an opportunity to compare and contrast the two Portuguese composers with the earlier Spanish polyphonic style. (NB – not to be confused with full-price CDGIM028, which offers Duarte Lôbo's other, six-part, Requiem and the Missa vox clamantis) The Gimell cover illustration is a detail from the El Greco painting to which I have referred above – doubly appropriate because El Greco and Victoria were both non-Spaniards who made strong impressions on the artistic life of sixteenth-century Spain.

The cover-pictures of both Helios discs are somewhat nondescript – both Naxos CD covers and the Gimell are more attractive – but that is a very small criticism of an excellent reissue. ---Brian Wilson, musicweb-international.com

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