Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow - Christmas Cantatas (2009)



1-17 Meine Seel' erhebt den Herren [18:36] 18-24 Herr, wenn ich nur dich habe [15:58] 25-32 Preiset mit mir den Herren [13:10] 33-46 Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele [31:38]
Ludger Remy - maestro al cembalo Constanze Backes - soprano Accademia Amsterdam Capella Frisiae

Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow is one of the largely neglected composers of the German baroque. If his name is mentioned it is most commonly in connection with Handel; Zachow was his first music teacher. As a composer in his own right he is hardly recognized; only his organ works are played now and then. He died in 1712, but that was barely commemorated by the music world. The German conductor Hermann Max redressed the balance a little with a concert in the Handel Festival 2012 in Halle, the town where Zachow had worked most of his life. As he was born in 1663 in Leipzig, 2013 will be another 'Zachow year', and that may result in more concerts and recordings of his music.

This disc was released in 2012 but the sessions took place in 2009. It is very much the result of the personal involvement of the oboist Onno Verschoor, director of the Accademia Amsterdam, who discovered Zachow's music some years ago and was struck by its quality. He talks about it in an interview in the booklet. It is not quite clear whether more recordings are going to be released. This is one of the very few discs of Zachow's cantatas, and as he composed a considerable number of them there is still much to be discovered.

Zachow was born in Leipzig in a family of Stadtpfeifer. The institution of the Stadtpfeifer - comparable with the city waits in England - goes back to the Middle Ages. These musicians were key to musical life in German towns, playing at public events, but also on birthdays and at the weddings of wealthy citizens. In Leipzig he probably attended the Thomasschule. In 1676 his family moved to Eilenburg where Johann Hildebrand was organist and Johann Schelle

Kantor - he was appointed Thomaskantor in Leipzig in the next year. Hildebrand may have been Zachow's teacher. In 1684 Zachow was appointed organist of the Marienkirche in Halle, a post he held until his death. He had various pupils, among them Handel.

Zachow composed around 70 cantatas, which is a relatively modest number, compared to what was written by the likes of Bach or Telemann. This can partly be explained by the fact that cantatas were performed in the Marienkirche only every third Sunday of the month. It was also common practice to perform cantatas by other composers. There was a lively exchange of liturgical music between musical directors in various towns and at various courts in Germany. The four cantatas on this disc are presented as Christmas cantatas, but that should be taken with a grain of salt. The opening piece is a German version of the Magnificat, strictly speaking not for Christmas, but rather for Mary Visitation in May. It could be performed in the Christmas period, though: Bach adapted his Magnificat for such a performance. Preiset mit mir den Herrn is for New Year's Day, but the remaining two cantatas have the indication omni tempore, which means that they can be performed at any time of the year.

These four cantatas are a mixture of old-fashioned and modern elements. There are very few recitatives; they only appear in Preiset mit mit den Herrn. Only a relatively small number of arias have a da capo, and chorale settings as we know them from Bach's cantatas are absent. All the cantatas open with an instrumental piece, called sonata or symphonia which is followed by a chorus. The opening choruses and the choruses which end every cantata are rooted in the polyphonic tradition, and sometimes take the form of a fugue. It is especially the instrumentation which is quite modern. The use of horns is the most remarkable aspect of Zachow's scorings. He also uses oboes which at the time were not common in church music. Probably even more remarkable is the use of the harp as an obbligato instrument in two cantatas. In the aria 'Sei, mein Herz, nicht so betrübt' from Meine Seel' erhebt den Herren the alto is accompanied by two viole da gamba which rather points to the past.

This cantata is a German version of the Magnificat, but not a strict translation. Only some ariosos quote the German translation, sometimes on the plainchant melody. The arias are poetic paraphrases of verses from the Magnificat. Herr, wenn ich nur dich habe begins with a sonata; between the two choruses we find four arias for the four voices. They all end with the same line: "Hab ich nur dich, mein Gott, so hats mit mir nicht not" - if only I have you, I am not in need. In Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele we find an aria for three voices and two for two sopranos. There are not only choruses at the beginning and the end, but also three between the various arias.

The Capella Frisiae is a professional choir which in this recording comprises twelve singers.

These also sing most of the solos; Constanze Backes who is mentioned at the cover only sings a couple of arias and ariosos and acted as a coach to the singers. I don't know at which level the choir members are used to sing as soloists. They do a good job, but the difference with Ms Backes is obvious. They don't quite explore the content of their arias to the full. The tutti sections are by far the best parts of this disc; the orchestra plays very well.

The booklet includes informative programme notes and also the lyrics. The colophon gives the name of someone who has translated the lyrics, but I have only seen the original German text. It is regrettable that English translations are omitted.

This disc is definitely welcome as it pays attention to a composer whose vocal oeuvre has been unjustly neglected for too long. The performances of the solo parts may not be consistently of the highest standard, but they are good enough to demonstrate the qualities of Zachow's music. I expect the cantatas which Hermann Max has performed in Halle in June 2012 to be released on disc as well. I would also like to recommend a disc with two other cantatas by Zachow and two German cantatas which are attibuted to Handel, released on CPO (review). ---Johan van Veen, musicweb-international.com

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