Johann Hermann Schein - Israelsbrünnlein (Fontana d'Israel) [2014]



1. Ihr Heiligen, lobsinget dem Herrn 2. Ach Herr, ach meiner schone 3. Zion spricht, der Herr hat mich verlassen 4. Die mit Tränen säen 5. Siehe, nach Trost war mir sehr bange 6. Siehe an die Werke Gottes 7. Drei schöne Dinge sind 8. Applause 9. Wem ein tugendsam Weib bescheret ist 10. Freue dich des Weibes deiner Jugend 11. Lieblich und schöne sein ist nichts 12. Ich bin jung gewesen 13. Lehre uns bedenken 14. Der Herr denket an uns 15. Nun danket alle Gott 16. Applause encore: 17. Heinrich Schütz - Das ist je gewisslich wahr (Trauermotette zum Tod von Johann Hermann Schein, SWV 277) 18. Applause Michael Drücker - Theorbe Jarek Thiel - Violoncello Wolfgang Kostujak - Organ Dresdner Kammerchor Hans-Christoph Rademann - conductor St.-Nicolai-Kirche Grünhain, 18.09.2012 FM Deutschlandfunk, 13.01.2014

Johann Hermann Schein was one of the most famous predecessors of Johann Sebastian Bach as Thomaskantor in Leipzig. Like Bach he was very much interested in and influenced by the Italian music of his time, although neither of them were ever in Italy. The similarity stretches further with each aiming at combining the contemporary Italian style with traditional polyphony.

Schein was born in Grünhain, near Annaberg, and moved with his family to Dresden, where he entered the court chapel as a treble at the age of 13. Here he also received further musical education from the Kapellmeister Rogier Michael. In 1608 he enrolled at the University of Leipzig. There he published his first collection of music, comprising secular songs on German texts and instrumental pieces. In 1615 he moved to Weimar to take the post of Kapellmeister to Duke Johann Ernst the Younger. It was only one year later that he was appointed as Thomaskantor in Leipzig, as successor to Sethus Calvisius.

Schein's personal life was tragic: he lost his first wife when their first child was born, and at least four of the five children from his second marriage didn't survive infancy. He himself suffered

from poor health, and died in 1630 at the age of 44. His health situation caused him problems in his duties as a performer, but didn't prevent him from being a prolific composer. Several collections of vocal music - both secular and sacred - and instrumental pieces were printed before the Fontana d'Israel or Israels Brünnlein which is generally considered his masterwork. It is this publication that resulted in Schein being considered one of the most prominent German composers of the 17th century. It was rediscovered in the 19th century by Carl von Winterfeld who immediately recognized it as the composer's most important work.

The collection, published in 1623, was not conceived of as a unity. It is in fact a compilation of compositions, some of which were written at an earlier date, probably commissioned by the authorities or by private persons in Leipzig, on the occasion of weddings, funerals and political events.

The texts are - with two exceptions - from the Bible, in particular the Old Testament, including the Apocrypha. The two exceptions are Ach Herr, ach meiner schone and O, Herr Jesu Christe, whose texts were probably written by Schein himself. All the pieces are set for five voices - only the concluding madrigal is in six parts - with a basso continuo ad libitum. This basso continuo has the character of a basso seguente, following the vocal bass part.

Fontana d'Israel is a perfect example of the mixture of 'modern' and 'traditional'. In the preface Schein specifically refers to the Italian style, in particular the madrigal, as he writes that these pieces are written in the "Italian madrigalian manner". This is reflected in the many madrigalisms in the musical translation of the text. At the same time Schein links with the German traditional motet style, dominated by counterpoint. Schein was also well aware of the modern Italian concertato style. This comes to the fore particularly in his Opella Nova, a collection of sacred concertos from 1618. Several pieces in Fontana d'Israel contain episodes for two or three voices, and here Schein resorts to the concertato style as well.

The main feature of these sacred madrigals is the expression of the text. Die mit Tränen säen - which is a setting of verses 5 and 6 of Psalm 126 - starts with chromaticism on the first half of verse 5: "They that sow in tears", but then only the diatonic scale is used in the second half: "shall reap in joy", where the tempo is also speeded up. A couple of times a shift in metre takes place. Polyphonic and homophonic passages alternate, as well as phrases for reduced voices with tutti passages. In other pieces the scoring is specifically used to illustrate elements in the text, for example in Siehe, nach Trost war mir sehr bange (Isaiah 38, 17-19a), where the phrase "For the grave cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth" is set for alto, tenor and bass (with the dynamic indication piano), whereas the next phrase: "The living, the living, he shall praise thee" is set for the whole

ensemble. The piece ends with a glorious and forceful "as I do this day".

In Was betrübst du dich, meine Seele we find an example of Schein's use of madrigalisms. The disquiet of the soul ("Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me?", Psalm 42, vs 11) is vividly illustrated by a series of quavers. And in Ach Herr, ach meiner schone musical figures picture the arrow ("For your arrows cause me great torment").

As far as performance practice is concerned, the fact that this collection was dedicated to the mayors and city council of Leipzig, the use of the term madrigal and the choice of some texts suggest that these pieces were not meant to be sung within a liturgical setting, but rather at special occasions. That leaves it to the interpreter to decide how to present this repertoire, with one voice per part or with a choir. ---Johan van Veen, musicweb-international.com

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