

Voces8 - Christmas (2012)



1. Henry GAUNTLETT arr. Thomas HEWITT JONES *Once in Royal David's City* [3:09]
2. Trad. Basque Carol arr. Jim CLEMENTS *Gabriel's Message* [3:01] 3. Hieronymus PRAETORIUS *Magnificat Quinti Toni* [6:23] 4. Francis POULENC *O Magnum Mysterium* [2:57]
5. Anon arr. Jim CLEMENTS *Away in a Manger* [2:58] 6. Anon arr. Charles WOOD *Ding Dong Merrily on High* [1:35] 7. Trad. Appalachian Carol arr. Jim CLEMENTS *I Wonder as I Wander* [3:34] 8. Henryk GÓRECKI *Totus Tuus* [8:42] 9. Trad. Arr. Barnaby SMITH *Coventry Carol* [3:23] 10. Graham LACK *Jesu, Swete Sone Dear* [2:11] 11. Graham LACK *At the Manger Mary Sings* 2:30] 12. Francis POULENC *Videntes Stellam* [2:51] 13. Trad. German Carol arr. Hieronymus PRAETORIUS *In Dulci Jubilo* [2:46] 14. Peter WARLOCK *Bethlehem Down* [4:34] 15. Anon *There is no Rose* [3:26] 16. Jean MOUTON *Nesciens Mater* [5:10] 17. Peter CORNELIUS *The Three Kings* 2:30] 18. William WALTON *What Cheer* [1:31] Voces8 (Ensemble)

For its album of Christmas music, British vocal octet Voces8 has put together an exceptionally attractive collection of classic carols and anthems mixed with less familiar works. The most striking aspects of the performances are a rare level of tonal clarity and a focused unanimity in the singers' vowels that produce a ringing, almost startling purity, which is enhanced by the crystalline, ideally resonant sound of Signum's CD. The focused tone allows the group to sound much larger than an octet, so the dynamic range of their performances is unusually broad and expressive, from the hushed opening of *Coventry Carol* to the rhapsodic fullness of *In dulci jubilo*. The sound has plenty of warmth, too, and the voices, which can blend so beautifully, have distinctive and colorful character when given solos lines. "Radiant" and "luminous" are adjectives that are perhaps overused in describing choral sound, but in this case they are fully deserved.

Jim Clements provides three new arrangements of traditional carols. They are notable for the way they capture and intensify the essential meaning of each carol. This is especially evident in his version of *I Wonder As I Wander*, which concludes with a wonderful, ecstatically wandering

canon and which has the additional virtue of subtly and cleverly correcting the grammatical awkwardness of the first verse. The program is marvelously varied, but all of the pieces, whether written in the middle ages or the 21st century, are gorgeous examples of sumptuous choral writing, and these performance do them full justice. Highly recommended. ---Stephen Eddins, AllMusic Review

Voces8 is a group of young singers, comprising two sopranos, two counter-tenors, two tenors, a baritone and a bass. The ensemble was founded as long ago as 2003 and has several previous recordings to its credit but this is the first time I've heard them. On the evidence of this disc I think I'd describe them, for ease of reference, as akin to a mixed-voice version of The King's Singers. Certainly, like that ensemble, they offer polished and well-nigh flawless singing. The tone, however, seems rather 'white'; frequently I found myself longing for a bit less studied technical perfection and a bit more by way of grit and feeling; much of this disc seems too smooth and effortless.

Once in Royal David's City opens the proceedings. To my ears the chosen speed is desperately slow – only three verses are sung – and the singing seems self-consciously moulded. The close harmonies of Thomas Hewitt Jones' arrangement in the final verse seem a bit overdone to me. There are three arrangements by Jim Clements. His way with Away in a Manger is too sweet and sentimental, I feel. The arrangement of I Wonder as I Wander is nice though I do wonder if it's too sophisticated for such a simple piece; the arrangement rather over-wraps the music.

On the other hand the Magnificat by Praetorius comes off rather well. The music is nicely paced and the parts are flawlessly balanced. We hear more Praetorius later in the programme. Voces8 inject some welcome vigour into his setting of In Dulci Jubilo and I couldn't help but note that they managed this without sacrificing any of their perfection of ensemble; if only they had 'let go' like this in a few more items – including some of the slower ones. Eventually I decided to make a comparison and played their performance of Mouton's exquisite, timeless Nesciens Mater, following it up with a recent recording of the same piece by The Tallis Scholars (review). The Voces8 performance hasn't a hair out of place and their singing is expertly controlled. Heard in isolation it's pretty good, if a little soulless. However, turn to The Tallis Scholars and it's easy to hear what's missing from Voces8. For one thing The Tallis Scholars, also fielding eight singers, produce a richer sound. More than that, however, there's more warmth and expression in their performance; you feel the phrases are leading somewhere and not just being delivered as perfectly as possible. For me, the choice is clear. In fairness, however, I ought to say that I played both recordings 'blind' to my wife and she preferred the Voces8 performance.

There are a few pieces that one usually hears sung by larger ensembles. One such is the Górecki. This is taken at a fairly fleet speed and I have to say that hearing it at this pace and sung by just eight singers rather diminishes the piece despite the technically flawless singing. To be sure, the small forces and perfect balance mean that every detail of Górecki's piece can be heard clearly but I feel one pays a price for this clarity. The two Poulenc Christmas motets also benefit from the clarity in that every strand of Poulenc's textures and every little harmonic quirk emerge probably more clearly than one has ever heard before. However, I'm not sure that the spirit of the music is properly conveyed.

In summary, these performances offer expert singing. However, in the booklet we are told that the programme "was conceived as a heart-warming selection of the ensemble's favourite seasonal music." With the best will in the world I struggle to discern much in the singing that is "heart-warming", despite its polish and technical accomplishment. The booklet itself I would describe as a "Designer product". In particular, while I welcome the provision of texts these are printed in blue on a black background, which doesn't make it very easy to read them. This disc may well appeal to some collectors but not to me, I'm afraid. ---John Quinn,
musicweb-international.com

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