

CD Review: Damijan Močnik (*1967) – et LUX perpetua – S:t Jacobs Kammarkör

Damijan Močnik (* 1967)

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S:t Jacobs Kammarkör, cond. Gary Graden

Anders Åstrand & Henrik Ståhlberg, percussion

String Ensemble of the Royal College of Music in Stockholm



eLUX Perpetua, Carus 83.487

Anyone with an interest in choral music who has visited Slovenia will be aware that the country boasts an extraordinary number of excellent choirs in relation to its size. Its choral tradition has been nourished by many fine musicians, and unsurprisingly it produces many composers of choral music, the best-known probably being Damijan Močnik. As music professor, conductor, and head of music at St. Stanislav's Institution, Ljubljana for many years, he has created a "choral pyramid", with five high school choirs and

two alumni choirs operating within the Institution. It is almost inevitable that his output as a composer has been almost entirely choral, and some of his finest sacred music is included in this CD.

In his home country Močnik's music has long been admired and widely performed, but it is partly through the performances of Gary Graden and his Stockholm St. Jacob's Chamber Choir (and with the World Youth Choir) that he has become better known internationally. Both students of Eric Ericson, Močnik and Graden clearly respect each other and work together here to produce a fine collection of performances. Močnik's style contains allusions to both Gregorian chant and Slovenian folk music, and his understanding of the voice is evident in all his writing. There are two complete Mass settings included here: the more recent *the Missa Sancti Francisci Assisiensis* (2014–2016) for Mixed Choir, Strings and percussion, and the Mass written for these performers, the *Missa Sancti Jacobi* (2007–2009) which is for Double Choir, triangle, and drum.

The CD opens with ***Acclamtio***, an *a cappella* piece originally written for women's voices in 1995 and re-written for mixed choir in 2015 for Gary Graden. The unison opening gradually expanding into richer harmony built on fourths and fifths is typical of Močnik's style, and the palindromic structure of the piece indicates the interests in different structures which feature in his work. The use of ostinato like repetitions of short motifs with longer melodies above and polyrhythmic passages are marks of his style.

The ***Missa Sancti Francisci*** arose from a Cantata the composer wrote, and many of the ideas arise from that piece. "*Francis's humble prayer and life were simple and so is my music, consisting of tuneful melodies, driving rhythms and fresh harmonies.*" The choral writing is straightforward, the word setting refreshingly connected to the meaning of the text, and the medieval and folk qualities referred to coalesce well. There is much infectious energy in this music, as well as some

occasionally lush harmony. The string writing too is straightforward, with occasional echoes of Vaughan Williams and Finzi to an English ear. The percussionist is encouraged to improvise introductions and links between movements, which sometimes seem to have less relevance than others. This is attractive music well within the reach of typical church or concert choirs.

In the booklet notes the composer writes that "*In **Missa Sancti Jacobi** for two four-voiced choirs, drum and triangle, I was able to set free my creative imagination, knowing that I was writing for an outstanding choir and a wonderful conductor.*"

This piece certainly makes demands on the performers, with a greater vocal range and more challenging harmonies for the singers but is just as approachable as the other to the listener. The same musical language is employed, but in a much more complex manner, but the structure of the Mass is unified by motifs which recur and unify. The limited percussion is very skilfully used to support and illuminate the choral parts.

There are two other *a cappella* motets in this collection. In between the two Mass settings is **Geburts-Nacht** (*Birth-Night*) written in 2014 for 8-part mixed choir, a Christmas motet which is a setting of a 17th century German text. It begins with bell-like entries from the chorus who then sustain an open 5th chord whilst two solo voices introduce a traditional carol type of melody, which is developed in a mixture of unison and then increasingly rich chordal writing, until a beautiful coda repeating the words "hellen Tag" (bright day) before subsiding on the open 5th chord to close. The title work, *...et lux perpetua* actually sets the text of the Introit from the Latin Requiem Mass and incorporates the *Kyrie Eleison*. Močnik explains, "*It is a certain homage to Josquin Desprez who honoured his teacher J. Ockeghem with 'Nymphes des bois'. In the same way that he used the choral requiem tune as a cantus firmus, I have based it on the same cantus firmus,*

now complemented by melodies from Josquin's five-voice Miserere. The basic compositional material develops into a complex polychordal and polyrhythmic structure."

All these performances encapsulate the composer's vision completely, with beautifully focussed and impeccably tuned singing. The balance is immaculate, and the commitment total. Gary Graden is a fine interpreter of many different styles of music, and he is clearly completely at home in this repertoire. Although this is not the most recent material, for those choirs who have not yet discovered Močnik's music it provides a wonderful introduction to music which deserves a wide public.



Peter Broadbent is one of Britain's leading choral conductors, known for his consistent commitment to contemporary music. In 1988, he formed the Joyful Company of Singers which rapidly established itself as one of Europe's leading chamber choirs, winning an impressive list of National and International

Competitions. Performances have included many of the major UK festivals, including the BBC Proms, and they have given concerts and broadcasts throughout Europe and in the USA. The JCS repertoire includes over 30 first performances and its discography extends to over 25 CDs, with recording continuing to be an important part of its activity. He works as a guest conductor throughout Europe, giving masterclasses and adjudicating at international competitions. He was recently awarded the Knight's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit for promoting and strengthening British-Hungarian cultural relations. In 2022 he was awarded the MBE for his services to

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