

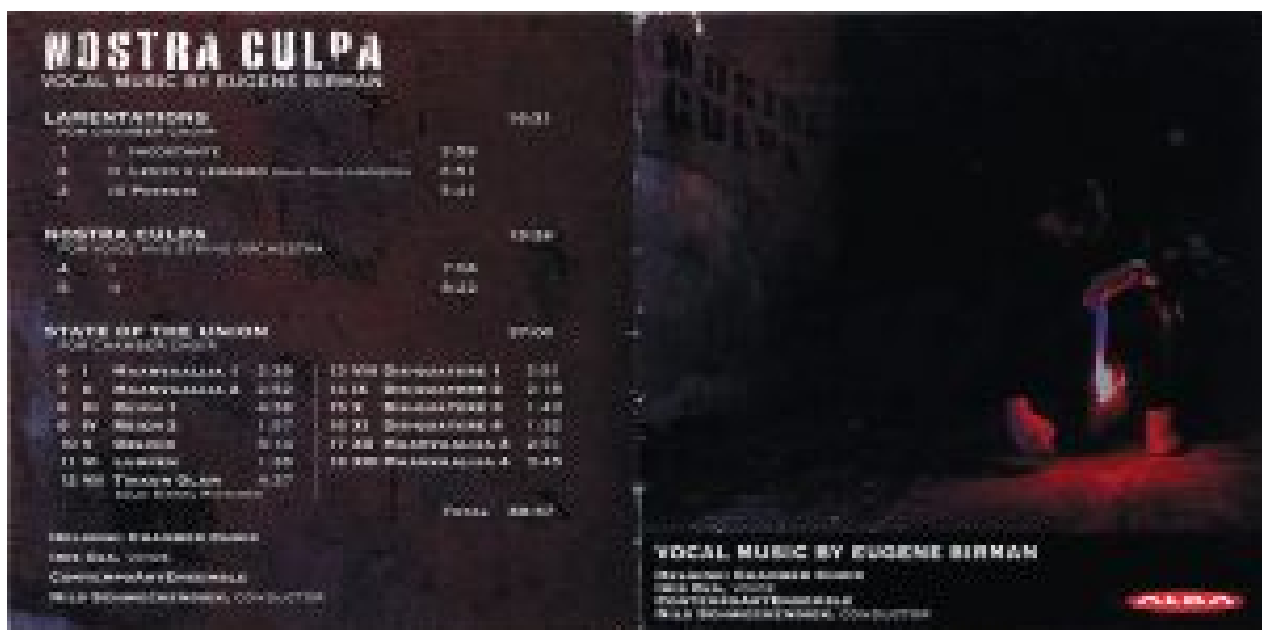
Review: Nostra Culpa, Vocal Music by Eugene Birman

Nostra Culpa

Vocal Music by Eugene Birman

Helsinki Chamber Choir, cond. Nils Schweckendiek

Alba Records ABCD 500



Eugene Birman (b. 1987) is a British composer who has written music for symphony orchestras, choirs, instrumental ensembles and soloists around the world and for various venues. His public career, which includes appearances on CNN, BBC World TV, Radio France and Deutsche Welle among others, is characterized by a fearless focus on socially relevant large-scale compositions covering the financial crisis, Russian border treaties and other situations. His connection to Finland is not only co-operation with the Helsinki Chamber Choir and Nils Schweckendiek, but he has also been appointed the sole Artist-in-Residence of the 2018 Helsinki Festival, which is Finland's biggest yearly cultural event.

The conductor Nils Schweckendiek, having studied music at Clare College, Cambridge and choral conducting in Freiburg and

Helsinki, has been the artistic director of the Helsinki Chamber Choir since 2007, and in 2014 he was appointed professor of choral conducting at the Sibelius Academy. The Helsinki Chamber Choir continues the great tradition of the Finnish Radio Chamber Choir, which was established in 1962 and came to its end in 2005 when the Finnish Broadcasting Company decided it was surplus to requirements. The Finnish Radio Chamber Choir was very important and premiered tens of choral works which nowadays are an essential part of the Finnish classical contemporary repertoire. In addition to the Finnish repertoire, the Radio Chamber Choir made numerous first performances of contemporary international repertoire in Finland. As the Finnish Radio Chamber Choir was closed down, the singers continued giving concerts and other performances and organised themselves under the name The Helsinki Chamber Choir. Since its first appearance it has been, and still is, the only professional chamber choir in Finland. Its wide-ranging repertoire includes music from the Renaissance to the present day and it is particularly highly regarded for its work with new music.

An excellent example of the choir's ability to present credible performances is this recording with compositions by Eugene Birman. He really is equal to his reputation, an interesting composer who has the ability to write fascinating, influential and moving music. Besides the normal notation, Birman uses many other devices and it is interesting to hear how, for example, whistling goes very well together with singing. Of the works on this CD two pieces have been written for a choir, and the title work, *Nostra Culpa*, is for voice and string orchestra. The works for choir are *Lamentations* and *State of the Union*. *Lamentations* is a kind of "motet-cantata" in three movements using texts from the book of *Lamentations* and *The Prayer of Manasseh* (Qumran, cave 4 version). The music is breathtaking with huge and impressive sound pillars. *The State of Union* could be called an opera. It is a thirty-seven minute huge work in thirteen movements. Again it is the co-

operation between the composer and the libretto by Scott Diel that makes the large work maintain its intensity. Scott Diel has completed six operatic projects with Eugene Birman so it is no wonder that their chemistry goes so well together. For instance the solo work *Nostra Culpa*, "sculpts the verbiage of a star economist pitted against a politician in distress – "Wonders of Austerity", "Frozen Pensions", "Internal Devaluation" – as if they were slabs of marble". *Nostra Culpa* on this recording is performed by Iris Oja (voice) and ContempoArtEnsemble.

The booklet text by Giorgio Biancorosso (Prof., Dept. of Music and Director, The University of Hong Kong) is interesting to read. It is a detailed analysis of Birman's music and the texts by Scott Deal as well as the Biblical texts and their relation to the music. The text is also a very philosophical approach to the world of the composer.

This recording and this music are worth getting to know!

Edited by Gillian Forlivesi Heywood, UK/Italy



REIJO KEKKONEN (*1961) is currently working as a director of publishing at the Sulasol music publishers (since 1988). He received a Master of Music degree (music education, violin, singing, piano, oboe) from the Sibelius Academy, in Helsinki, in 1991, with special studies in composition (Vladimir Agopov, Tapani Länsiö) and in choral conducting (Matti Hyökki, Erkki Pullinen). He has played with various orchestras and bands and has also worked as a professional singer (2nd bass) with the Finnish Radio Chamber Choir, Sibelius Academy Vocal Ensemble, and Cetus Noster, among others. Kekkonen has served as a judge in choral competitions, composition competitions, and arrangement competitions worldwide. He has held several important

positions in organisations, festivals, and competitions in Finland and elsewhere.

Edited by Richard Kutner, USA