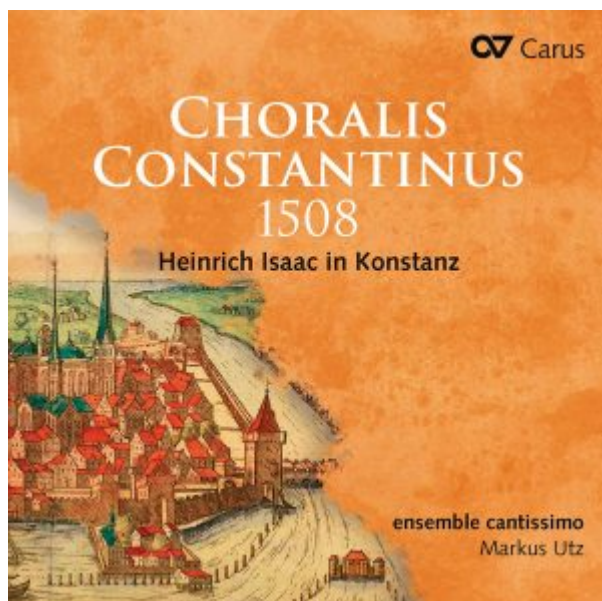


# Choralis Constantinus 1508 – Heinrich Isaac in Konstanz

*Reviewed by Tobin Sparfeld, USA*

One might expect that a classical album featuring numerous world premiere recordings would only contain music written recently. This recording of motets from Heinrich Isaac's *Choralis Constantinus*, however, premieres works published over 500 years ago.



Franco-Flemish composer Heinrich Isaac (1450 –1517) was one of the most prolific composers of the Renaissance, producing a range of diverse music, including: instrumental music, masses, motets, and part songs in Italian, German, and French. His best known work may be the song “Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen.”

Though little biographical information remains of Isaac, his reputation amongst his contemporaries must have been substantial since Lorenzo de Medici invited him from Innsbruck to Florence in 1484, joining other Florentine artistic figures such as da Vinci, Botticelli, and Michelangelo. During this time he became a Florentine citizen, married a Florentine, and settled in Italy.

In 1496 Isaac moved to Vienna and was commissioned by Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, in whose employment he would remain until his death. During this time he composed and collected over 375 Gregorian-chant based polyphonic motets which were delivered to Constance Cathedral in late 1508 and early 1509. Though not published until 1550-1555 after his

death, the motets remain some of the finest examples of chant-based Renaissance polyphony in existence. This posthumous publication, however, meant that the works only came to light during the Catholic Reformation, spearheaded by the Council of Trent. As such, some of the more interesting works were deemed unsuitable for liturgical use. The ranges of the motets, which are more like works for STTB voices than SATB, may also explain why they have received relatively little attention.

This recording is a collection of eighteen motets from Volume II of the *Choralis Constantinus*, and includes the motets commissioned specifically for Constance Cathedral in 1508. Of the eighteen selections, thirteen are world premiere recordings.

Founded in 1994, ensemble *cantissimo* features elite singers from Switzerland and Germany and specializes in previously unheard choral repertoire. The ensemble was founded by conductor Markus Utz who is also an organist and pedagogue. He has served as Professor of Choral Conducting at Zurich University of the Arts since 2007 and has led the twelve-voice ensemble in this recording, which took place in July 2021. Fittingly, the recording site was on the island of Reichenau in the middle of Lake Constance. The motets on the recording are organized by liturgical calendar: Christmas, devotional texts to Mary, Easter, Pentecost, and the Feast of St. Conrad. Typically in this volume, the motets for a particular feast day were grouped into Introit, Alleluia, Sequence, and Communion. The sequences are usually the longest and feature the most complicated imitation of the chant melody.

Highlights of the recording include: the opening *Puer natus*, which features a brilliant four-part imitation of the chant melody in sections; the biting dissonances at the end of the *Haec dies*; the novel meter change in the middle of *Dominus in sina*; and the exciting imitated melody introduced by the soprano voice in the *Spiritus Domini*. Some of the motets are a cappella, while others are doubled by sackbuts and cornetts.

While intonation and the vocal quality of the singers is strong, diction is harder to hear in the instrumental movements, and the voices retreat slightly into the reverberation of the church sanctuary.

As many of these selections are within reach for many choral ensembles, this recording is recommended for anyone seeking accessible Renaissance literature in addition to connoisseurs of exquisite Renaissance music. Since the works are of a consistent nature, the album transports the listener through Isaac's motets of careful consonance and sublime imitation. Conductor Markus Utz and his ensemble cantissimo deserve congratulations for bringing these yet unheard recordings to our ears.

*Edited by Sam Hemsworth, USA*



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