



American Record Guide

Flower of Beauty

Westminster Choir/Joe Miller

Westminster Choir 909 -- 55 minutes (609-921-7100 x8307)

At last! I've been looking forward to this album for months now, ever since director Joe Miller told me when he was here in Charleston last summer that it would soon be released. It's his first recording with them. As good fortune would have it, my editor entrusted it to me, even though he knows I'm an unabashed WC fan. I'm richly blessed to have been one of the choir's regular Spoleto reviewers for over a decade now, and I've long since run out of superlatives. I relish any opportunity to hear them, whether recorded or in concert. Despite some stiff competition from the folks at St Olaf, the Westminster Choir—quite simply—has been the gold standard for academic choirs in America for nearly a century.

Since his appointment three seasons back to succeed retiring maestro Joseph Flummerfelt as Westminster College's director of choral activities, Miller has taken these select singers (the cream of Westminster's eight choirs) in some interesting new directions. Having borne first-hand witness (including active collaboration) to the renaissance of quality choral music across Scandinavia and (especially) the Baltic nations, he and his choirs are making something of a specialty of that region's music.

Sonically, the choir's vaunted vocal richness remains fully intact, though it seems to have shifted to somewhat purer, more transparent sonorities. Looking over the program, I was delighted to see that most of the pieces I heard from them over the past two Spoleto Festivals are included here. As usual, their selections cover a broad spectrum of choral art, from Renaissance polyphony to exceptional works written since the turn of the new millennium.

The choice Renaissance fare includes a lovely, canon-laced Marian motet, 'Ave Maria, Virgo Serena', by Josquin Des Prez, and Thomas Weelkes's keening 'When David Heard' and William Byrd's bright and joyous 'Haec Dies'. Fast-forward a couple of centuries to the romantic era for 'Flower of Beauty', a touching love song to a young man's new bride by John Clements. Traditional sacred and folk traditions get their due with wonderful arrangements of the old American hymn 'In Bright Mansions Above' and the folk-classic 'Shenandoah'. Then there's Moses Hogan's brilliant treatment of the spiritual, 'Great Day'; listen for mezzo Kelly Ann Bixby's solo.

From there it's all original compositions by modern composers. Exemplifying Miller's apparent predilection for Baltic composers, we hear delicious, dissonance-laced music in 'Lucis Creator Optime', a Latin setting by the Lithuanian Vytautas Miskinis. I was especially happy to hear Estonian master Veljo Tormis's fascinating 'Laevas Laudakse' again, with its aura of ancient folk tradition and vivid tone-painting over repetitive undercurrents. The Russian tradition gets some attention, with Georgi Petrov Dimitrov's gripping 'Umrel Dzherman'. Serbian composer Ivan Markovic contributes 'Fatise Kolo', a bright and exuberant wedding song arrangement. The only pieces I don't recall hearing from them already are 'I Would Live in Your Love', a feast of succulent modern harmonies by Nathan Jones; and Belgian composer Rudi Tas's stunning 'Miserere', a Latin setting with solo cello, is a particularly intense treat. My absolute favorite, though, is the radiant 'Sanctus et Benedictus' movement from Frank Martin's unfathomably deep *Mass for Double Choir*.

Sound quality—from two different venues—is consistently excellent. The booklet offers texts, translations, and information about the performers—but no program notes; I'm glad I was already familiar with most of the music. This choir can take the discerning listener to many places in the sprawling world of choral art—but in the process, they never fail to drop you off in choral heaven along the way.

KOOB

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