Paradisi Gloria - Sacred music by Emperor Leopold I

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It follows quite hard on the heels of their recording of Georg Muffat's 24-part Missa in labore requies (c.1690), with sonatas by Antonio Bertali, Heinrich Biber and Johann Schmelzer, also recorded in the beautiful Abbey Church at Muri, with its ideal acoustic. I downloaded that some time ago from eclassical.com (Audite 97.539 [71:19]) and meant to review it in the very last edition of Download News but somehow missed the boat, so I'm catching up now. Both these recordings were made in August 2015, clearly a very productive month. Were I not giving the award to the Leopold I CD, I would have considered the beautiful Muffat album for Recording of the Month status.

The Muffat is large-scale music and it receives a large-scale performance, with the four galleries of the church ideal for this polychoral work. It's a pity that the download is 16-bit only and that the physical product is on CD not SACD but the effect is still spectacular in stereo, giving full rein to an impressive performance of some impressive music. It comes with the booklet, but that appears to be a truncated version of what comes with the CD, unless that too comes without texts. All the music dates from the late seventeenth century, so roughly contemporary with the music of Kaiser Leopold on the new release: Bertali, two of whose church sonatas feature, was among the Emperor's court musicians, as was Schmelzer, composer of one sonata, while Biber, composer of another two, was knighted by Leopold in 1690. These sonatas might have seemed an anticlimax at the end of the album were it not that they are often just as extrovert as the Mass and just as well performed.

It's not unusual for reigning sovereigns to spend much of the time huntin' and shootin' but Leopold I additionally spent more time listening to and composing music than to ruling his empire. He made a pretty good fist of it, too: apart from Henry VIII I can't offhand think of any other royal composers of his stature. His music features on a number of recordings: for example his setting of the Marian hymn Ave Maris Stella, which Mark Sealey described as 'inspiring and appealing', on a CD of Biber's Vespers music (Carus 83.348 – review – Download News 2012/20 and August 2011/2).

There are only two other recordings completely devoted to his music: his sacred choral work Il Lutto dell'Universo is available on Fra Bernardo FB1511291 and two of the works on the Audite CD are also available on a download-only 1997 CPO album: the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary (Vertatur in luctum) and the three lessons of the Office for the Departed are coupled with a lengthy setting of Psalm 50 (51), Miserere, from David Cordier (high counter-tenor), Jörg Waschinski (soprano),

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Henning Voss (alto), Achim Kleinlein (tenor), Marcos Fink (bass), Vienna Academy Choir and Orchestra/Martin Haselböck (999567-2 [68:09] – download in mp3 and lossless from eclassical.com, NO booklet). The booklet is available from Naxos Music Library.

Whichever recording you choose of the music common to both recordings, it's all extremely beautiful. Haselböck opens with the Seven Sorrows of Mary, placed second on the new Audite. Although both use much the same forces in this work, the instrumental ensemble on Audite sounds fuller, thanks largely to the Muri acoustic, the soloists on CPO slightly more prominent. Both convey the beauty and the pathos of the music, the former slightly more in evidence on Audite, the latter on CPO. That may sound as if I would prefer some kind of hybrid of the two recordings, but both are very effective.

Both albums close with the three lessons of the first nocturne of the Office for the Dead, composed, as the lengthy Latin title indicates, in honour of Leopold's second wife Claudia Felicitas, who died in 1676 after a short marriage. It was later performed at the Emperor's own funeral and at that of his third wife. Strict lovers of authentic performance may prefer the CPO recording on which solely male voices are employed, reflecting the practice of the time for funerary music. The notes report on the existence of a number of high falsettists of the time: here David Cordier (a very high counter-tenor) and Jörg Waschinski (soprano) rise splendidly to the occasion in the high parts.

On Audite the two soprano parts are very clearly taken by female voices but they and Alex Potter on the alto line offer performances which can hardly be faulted except on extremely purist grounds. If anything the singing is even more beautiful than from the CPO team.

Leopold had already composed the Requiem, W11, for his first wife, who also lived for only a short time after their marriage. Composer sovereigns seem to be unfortunate in that respect, but at least Leopold didn't divorce or have any of his spouses executed. The Requiem was one of three works performed at the exequies of Margarita Teresa, the others being by the directors of the court music, Bertali and Schmelzer. Leopold sets only the Introit, Kyries, Sanctus and Benedictus, Agnus Dei, Lux æterna and final Requiem æternam, not the Dies iræ, so the overall effect is far from gloomy.

The Requiem and the opening Stabat Mater receive very fine performances with the emphasis, as in the Audite performances of the works common to both albums, on the beauty of the music without neglecting its emotional power. Though the Stabat Mater is in what the booklet calls 'the deeply sad key of B minor' the overall impression is of beauty rather than tragedy, making the final verse's hope to partake in paradisi gloria, the glory of paradise, particularly apposite, as is the choice of that phrase to characterise the programme as a whole.

The psalm Miserere receives a performance on CPO which brings out its penitential nature, though you shouldn't expect anything as florid as Allegri's famous setting for the Sistine chapel. Even if my overall choice is for the new Audite, try at least to hear Martin Haselböck and his team's take on this psalm. The download costs $12.27, not a great extra outlay, but the Miserere can be downloaded separately for $6.08.

Don't get excited that the Audite disc is contained in a round-shouldered case: it's a CD, not SACD. Nevertheless the recording sounds pretty well – fuller than the CPO, though marginally less focused on the soloists, a small price to pay for the wonderful Muri acoustic. Those who must have better-than-CD quality will find 24-bit stereo and

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surround downloads available from Audite.

The booklet is excellent in terms of the information provided, including exactly which solo singers and instruments are involved in each work. The CPO booklet gives that information in more general terms: it's like comparing an organ recital with a general specification of the manuals and stops with one also offering the individual registration for each work. Audite earn a black mark, however, for not providing English translations of the texts.

A recent release from Ricercar contains Requiem Masses by Johann Caspar Kerll and Johann Joseph Fux, both associated with Emperor Leopold, the Kerll in a 1689 volume dedicated to Leopold and the latter composed for his widow and subsequently employed on the death of his successor, Charles VI. (RIC368 – watch this space).

My first impression on hearing the new Audite recording was of overwhelming beauty and that remains my lasting impression after several hearings. It's on those grounds and for its presentation of rare repertoire that I have made it a Recording of the Month. I hope that Audite's gamble in recording such non-standard music pays off as well as it deserves. Ideally I recommend both it and the older CPO download but if you can run to only one, the Audite team just have the edge. And next time there's a question about composer sovereigns in a pub quiz night, you'll know two answers.

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