



Georg Muffat: Missa in labore requies & Church Sonatas by Bertali, Schmelzer & Biber

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Fanfare (Bertil van Boer - 01.12.2016)

In 1684 Salzburg court organist Georg Muffat faced one of his many career disappointments when he was passed over as Kapellmeister in favor of Heinrich Biber. It is true that Biber not only had much more experience and was local to boot, but for Muffat it was a decisive blow to his ambitions that not even a consolation trip to Italy to study with Bernardo Pasquini could alleviate. Even here, he did not receive his full time abroad, for after only about 10 months he was forced to return to celebrate an important event, the 1,000-year anniversary of the founding of the Salzburg court (give or take a century). Among the extensive musical events for the festivities, Muffat was only allowed to contribute some keyboard sonatas in the newer Italian style. Buoyed by these works, he hoped to parlay their success into a more lucrative post, only to have his hopes dashed even when he had dedicated the collection to the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I. He and Biber never really got along, and so by 1690 he abandoned Salzburg for the smaller court of Passau just in time for the ordination of Count Johann Lamberg as Prince-Archbishop.

Delayed by a year, this event allowed Muffat to focus his skill on a special music for the celebrations, not having to share the stage as he had in Salzburg. He continued to compose church music for Passau up to his death in 1704, but unfortunately little of it has survived. This, indeed, appears to have been the only Mass, a huge sprawling composition in 24 parts, including divided vocal chorus (often used in echo) and no fewer than three instrumental consorts; a cornett and trombone ensemble, a clarino and timpani ensemble (five trumpets), and the usual strings and continuo. In addition, there are parts for two organs in support. Somehow, the work wound up in the possession of Joseph Haydn, and eventually it became part of the Esterházy library. There seems to have been some small controversy about attribution, but this has been solved, and here for the first time the entire monumental work has been recorded using the resonant church at the monastery in Muri.

The work is monumental in all of its aspects. The Kyrie opens with a nice echo effect between the strings and brass, a sort of overture before the powerful stentorian choral statement, with a softer set of contrapuntal solo moments that provide a textural contrast. The second section is a gentle fugue that unfolds with a gathering of voices that builds into the block chords of the next section, a sort of recapitulation. The Gloria begins with a sort of march at "In terra pax hominibus" which explodes into cascades of full choral and orchestral sound; the result is inexorable progression, but the "Laudamus te" is a lyrical duet above a walking bass that continues the forward motion, first with two higher voices and then with two lower ones before they all combine at the cadence. The low bass begins a layered series of lines at the "Domine fili," eventually turning into a rather complex fugue at the "Qui tolli peccata mundi." The glorious Credo is as magnificent a statement of faith as one could wish, with powerful brass and choral expostulations; here the cori spezzati

legacy of Venice is clearly in evidence. At the "Et incarnates" we are suddenly immersed into a thoughtful and gentle mood that is almost pastoral, right up to the sorrowful "Crucifixus" with its close vocal harmonies. The relentless ostinato bass returns at the imitative Sanctus, with brilliant cries of "Hosanna in excelsis." The opening of the Agnus Dei floats languidly above a mysterious full brass chords in the trombone and cornett choir, but by the third statement, the "Dona nobis pacem" builds again to a full-voiced conclusion. This is one of the most magnificent Masses of the period, and well worth this resurrection.

The remaining works, all by Muffat's contemporaries, seem just a bit pale in comparison, sounding for all the world like a bit of filler. That is not to say that the styles are not incompatible, but their inclusion tends to reinforce the Venetian quality of the vocal music, especially the fanfare-like Antonio Bertali sonata à 13. The Biber works are fun, but in general they aren't quite up to the brilliance of the Muffat and so are a bit like comic relief.

The performance by the combined Capella Murensis and Les Cornets Noirs is powerful and convincing. Conductor Johannes Strobl has the large forces well in hand, producing in the resonant church a work that is both noble and clear. No flaws seem to mar this recording. Well recommended as a must for those interested in celebratory Baroque church music.