Gregor Joseph Werner: Vol. V: Festive Masses

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REVIEW

'I am forced to draw attention to the gross negligence of the local castle chapel, the unnecessarily large princely expenses, and the lazy idleness of the whole band, the present responsibility for which must be laid at the door of the present director…' Those are the words of Gregor Joseph Werner, Haydn's predecessor as Kapellmeister to the Esterházy family, 'the present director' indeed being Haydn himself. It is rather sad that the image of Werner with which we are most likely to be familiar today is that of an embittered and sick old man at the end of his life. Werner had been appointed as Kapellmeister in 1728, becoming an industrious servant of the Esterházys and a pupil of Caldara. His output was largely centred on church music, which is known to include at least 22 oratories, Masses, Requiems, Te Deums, Vespers and Lamentations along with secular instrumental music. Such a prodigious output suggests too great a facility, yet already in his great study of Haydn H. C. Robbins Landon had recognised the quality of Werner's compositions, suggesting that his religious music 'displays all this learning [Werner was trained in the Fux contrapuntal tradition] in a genuinely impressive way …', while we know Haydn held his music in the highest regard.

The present disc is the final issue of five CDs devoted to Werner's sacred works, though it is the only one to come my way up to now. It includes two so-called 'festive' masses scored for a pair of trumpets, timpani and strings, the Missa 'Trinitas in unitate veneranda' and the Missa 'Iam hyems transiit', though the disappointingly brief notes by conductor Lajos Rovatkay tell us nothing of their progeny. In addition, there is a brief motet also based on 'Iam hyems transiit', a setting of especially lovely lines from chapter 2 of the Song of Solomon, and an even briefer three-movement 'Symphonia Tertia' for strings. Both Masses are multi-faceted works that range from the contrapuntal writing one would expect from a composer trained in the wake of the Viennese Masses of Fux and Caldara, through homophonic choral writing to extensive solos and ensembles. Indeed, the extent of the often quite florid solo and ensemble passages is unusual for this kind of work, the more so since it manages to avoid overt operatic influence. But most striking of all is that both Masses are imbued with both a joyous spirit and humane warmth that I do not find in Fux or Caldara, combined with an elegant grace and, at times, intensely moving writing at more solemn moments of the text. For example, the setting of 'Et incarnatus' in both Masses is quite different, but in both brings a moment of quiet inner reflection with exquisite harmonies including touches of chromaticism, a distinctive strength of Werner's writing on the evidence of both these Masses. In the 'Trinitas' Mass, 'Crucifixus' is a long, melismatic bass solo, its winding line here negotiated by Anton Haupt with sensitive skill, while the equivalent section in the 'Iam hyems transiit'

Mass is a beautifully worked solo quartet that includes some especially piquant harmonies. So many striking moments clamour for attention. An early example arrives with the second Kyrie of the ‘Trinitas’ Mass, no repetition of Kyrie I but a movement built from the bass up to culminate in a resplendent climax for the whole Kyrie. The unusually-structured motet, presumably intended for performance with its offspring Mass, opens with a verse scored for the same forces before continuing to a tenor recitative and aria. It concludes with a brilliant Alleluia.

Both Masses are a revelation, their effect enhanced by the outstanding performances by Hannover-based la festa musicale. I don’t know the strength of the forces employed by the Esterházys during Werner’s tenure, but the modest numbers involved here – two-per-part chorus plus a pair of trumpets, tympani and small string ensemble – work well, with the fully-scored festive passages being projected with full brilliance and more intimate moments sensitively handled. All four soloists are quite outstanding either in solo passages or participating in the various ensembles, which reveal an excellent blend. Passage work is uniformly cleanly negotiated; I was especially impressed with the pure but warmly characterful soprano of Magdalene Harer, a name new to me. The conducting of the veteran Hungarian-born conductor Lajos Rovatkay is throughout idiomatic and responsive. Sad to relate that Rovatkay died at the start of 2026 at the age of 92. Renowned for his place in the development of early music study and performance in north Germany, his Werner series will alone stand as a splendid legacy.

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RECORDING

Werner: Festive Masses

By EMR2015 March 3, 2026 No Comments

Magdalena Harer, Alex Potter, Hans Jörg Mammel, Anton Haupt
ScTTBar, la festa musicale conducted by Lajos Rovatkay
70:29
Audite 97.836

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Brian Robins