



Stille Nacht... - Christmas Choir Music

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The CD has releases from the RIAS Kammerchor are normally reliable, intelligent and worth the wait. However, I came away from this one feeling unsatisfied. Rather than a newly recorded disc, it's a collection of recordings that the choir made between 1972 and 1986 under their musical director, Uwe Gronostay. It showcases his work with them throughout that period. The booklet contains some historically important information about their work together, and the notes proudly proclaim that this is the first master release of the original tapes. It certainly stands as testimony to the quality and homogeneity of the sound that Gronostay managed to achieve with the choir. However, unless you looked in depth at the booklet information, you'd find it all but impossible to tell which tracks were recorded at the beginning of the set period and which came towards the end. The choir has a relatively heavy sound for a chamber choir, rich and with a chocolaty luxury to the sound, remarkably focused around the centre, but still retaining remarkable flexibility for all that. Listening to them is a very pleasant experience.

The problem is that the construction of the programme didn't really work, for me, beyond being a confection to tickle the ear. Its arrangement is meant to mirror two principles. The first is chronological: the first chunk is Renaissance and Early Baroque, followed by what they call a Romantic Interlude. They finish with some twentieth century numbers, including a piece by Gronostay himself. That said, concluding with *Stille Nacht* rather torpedoed that principle. Secondly, though, the programme is meant to "range from the mysterious night in which God's light falls, to songs of praise, narrative and contemplative songs about the birth of Christ and then back to the night"; so says Habakuk Traber's booklet note. That sounds like a laudable aim and organising principle, but it is made very difficult to follow due to the lack of translations in the notes. The Latin and German texts are provided on the Audite website (not in the booklet). Even though the booklet essay is translated into English, there is no English translation of the texts in the online provision, which means that a listener like me is all but entirely ignorant of the alleged unfolding narrative. Instead, organising the tracks like this feels rather unsuccessful due to the homogeneity of the material. An additional problem is that, without understanding the texts, the sequence of Baroque/Renaissance numbers sound rather samey.

The homogeneity becomes less of a problem from that point onwards. The Romantic tracks (14-16) sound very different in contrast to what went ahead, and offer more of a warm bath feeling in which to immerse oneself. I particularly enjoyed Herzogenberg's vigorous Magnificat and Loewe's luxurious *In Dulci Jubilo*. In the twentieth century section, Wolfgang Jehn's and Hans Mischeelsen's carols sound, in their strophic approachability, a bit like a German John Rutter or Bob Chilcott. Johann David's *O oriens* is much more mystical, incorporating the text and melody of *Nun Komm der Heiden Heiland* into the more mysterious Latin setting. Zimmerman's

jazzy carols do a mean line in a walking bass, while Barbe's rely more on thick harmonies to make their impact. Gronostay's own carol is similar, with a strong melodic line in the bass voices against wordless accompaniment from the ladies.

Pleasing as it is, the disc struck me as pleasant but lacking in impact, for all the quality of the choral singing. English translations would certainly have helped but perhaps a more varied approach to the order of the tracks wouldn't have gone amiss either, especially in the opening sequence.

