



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

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Georg Muffat's oeuvre is not that large, but his is one of the fairly well-known names in music history. This is largely due to the fact that he was among the first advocates of the *goût réunis* — the mixture of elements of the Italian and the French style — in his compositions. This was not only for artistic reasons; Muffat also had political motifs: "The warlike weapons and their causes are far from me; the notes, strings, and lovely musical sounds are my daily preoccupation, and as I mix the French style with that of the Germans and the Italians, I don't make war but probably give to those people an example of desired harmony and sweet peace." One could call him a true European.

The largest part of his oeuvre comprises instrumental works. His first printed edition was *Armonico tributo* (1682), a set of five-part sonatas for strings and basso continuo. It was influenced by Corelli's concerti grossi he had heard during a stay in Rome. The French style, which he had learned from Lully, comes especially to the fore in two collections entitled *Florilegium musicum* (1695 and 1698). Muffat was educated as an organist and held several positions in this capacity. His only organ works, published in 1690 as *Apparatus musico-organisticus*, show the influence of the greatest Italian keyboard masters of the 17th century, Girolamo Frescobaldi and Bernardo Pasquini. The main work on the present disc is also influenced by Italy, especially by the polychoral music written in Venice since the late 16th century.

The *Missa in labore requies* is one of a number of large-scale festive masses written in Austria, Bohemia and southern Germany in the late 17th century. The best-known example is the *Missa Salisburgensis*, attributed to Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber. It is not known for which occasion Muffat wrote his mass but it was performed in Passau, where he was Kapellmeister from 1690 until his death in 1704. The name of the mass is also a bit of a mystery. It refers to a line in the Pentecostal sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus*: "In labour, rest, in heat, temperance, in tears, solace." Ernst Hintermaier, in his liner notes, writes that the title is "rather unusual for the time and could point to the episcopal consecration on Pentecost Sunday in Passau Cathedral". He adds, however, that it may also refer to Muffat's time in Salzburg. He worked there for some time alongside Biber and felt "the envy and resentment of his colleagues", which he mentions in the preface to the *Ausserlesene Instrumental-Music* of 1701.

The mass is a relatively late discovery. It was known for some time, but classified in the category of doubtful compositions by Muffat. That seems to be why it did not receive much attention. Nowadays there is no doubt about its authenticity. It was not

Muffat's only sacred work. His successor in Passau, Benedikt Anton Aufschneider, reported that he composed three masses, an Offertory and two Salve Reginas and that at the end of his life he regretted that he had not composed more. Unfortunately, the other pieces have been lost. This mass is the only specimen of his skills in the composition of vocal music which has come down to us. The quality is such that one can only agree with Muffat: it is a pity he did not compose more. It is not inferior to other music of the time, such as the masses and other sacred music from Biber's pen.

In works like this Mass the splendour is obviously of greater importance than text expression. Moreover, it is only natural that many textual details are lost in the large spaces in which such polychoral works were performed. Add to that the inclusion of a battery of wind instruments — cornetts, trumpets and sackbuts plus timpani — and one will understand that there are not that many moments of text expression. Performing this Mass is not easy. One needs a large space and at the same time the structure needs to be as clear and as transparent as possible. The Abbey Church in Muri in Switzerland is perfectly suited for a work like this. The 24 parts are divided into five "choirs", two vocal and three instrumental. These are situated on the floor in the centre of the abbey and on the four balconies in the corners. This allows for spatial effects in the dialogue between the groups. The eight solo voices are joined in the tutti by sixteen ripieno voices. The balance between the voices and the instruments, as well as the acoustics, are not without problems. The singers are sometimes not quite up to the instruments and often the text is hard to understand.

In this respect the recording directed by Gunar Letzbor is a little better. That is probably due to the generally slower tempi, although the difference is not substantial. Other factors could be the clearer articulation and the fact that Letzbor has only twelve singers (soloists and ripienists) to the 24 in this recording. What choice is more in line with the circumstances in Muffat's time is impossible to say. Musically a smaller ensemble seems preferable. In Letzbor's recording the top lines are sung by boys, which is certainly in accordance with the practice at the time, although it is perfectly possible that in Muffat's time castratos have been involved. From that perspective I prefer Letzbor's performance but there is certainly much which speaks in favour of the present recording, for instance the quality of the singers and players involved. The soloists are all specialists and they do a fine job here.

Whereas Letzbor confines himself to the Mass, this disc also includes some instrumental music by people from Muffat's time (Biber) and the previous generation (Bertali, Schmelzer). Their works are representative of what was written and appreciated in Austria in the second half of the 17th century, especially at the imperial court in Vienna. These pieces are mostly multifunctional. They could be played at the court, for instance during dinner, or as part of the liturgy, for instance as substitutes for the antiphons following a psalm in a Vespers service or as Epistle music (to be sung during Mass between Epistle and Gospel). That is expressed in the titles of the collections from which the pieces by Biber and Schmelzer are taken: "sonatas serving both the altar and the court" (Biber), "sacred and profane ensemble music" (Schmelzer). Biber's pieces are for strings, Schmelzer's Sonata XII is in seven parts divided into two choirs, performed here with wind instruments. Bertali's sonatas, preserved in manuscript, are for three choirs of wind and strings. Biber's sonatas are very well known but Schmelzer's sonatas less so, and Bertali is still only at the beginning of being rediscovered and fully appreciated. These instrumental pieces, a worthwhile addition to Muffat's Mass, receive a brilliant and engaging performance. Here the space is less of a problem than in the vocal music.