

Gregor Joseph Werner: Vol. I: Salve Reginas | Pastorellas

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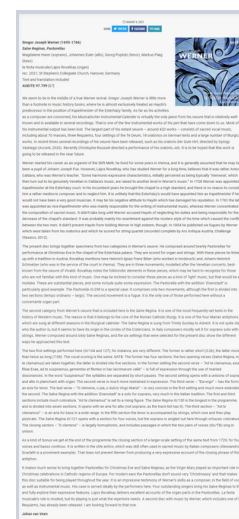
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Werner started his career as an organist of the Stift Melk; he lived for some years in Vienna, and it is generally assumed that he may have been a pupil of Johann Joseph Fux. However, Lajos Rovatkay, who has studied Werner for a long time, believes that it was rather Antonio Caldara, who was Werner's teacher. "Some harmonic-expressive characteristics, initially perceived as being typically 'Viennese', which then turn out to be genuinely Venetian in Caldara's music, are raised to another level in Werner's music." In 1728 Werner was appointed Kapellmeister at the Esterházy court. In his incumbent years he brought the chapel to a high standard, and there is no reason to consider him a rather mediocre composer and to neglect him. It is unlikely that the Esterházy's would have appointed him as Kapellmeister if he would not have been a very good musician. It may be his negative attitude to Haydn which has damaged his reputation. In 1761 the latter was appointed as vice-Kapellmeister who was mainly responsible for the writing of instrumental music, whereas Werner concentrated on the composition of sacred music. It didn't take long until Werner accused Haydn of neglecting his duties and being responsible for the decrease of the chapel's standard. It was probably mainly his resentment against the modern style of his time which caused the conflict between the two men. It didn't prevent Haydn from holding Werner in high esteem, though. In 1804 he published six fugues by Werner which were taken from his oratorios and which he scored for string quartet (recorded complete by *Ars Antiqua Austria*; Challenge Classics, 2012).

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chapel of the Esterháza palace. They are scored for organ and strings. With these pieces he linked up with a tradition in Austria; Rovatkay mentions here Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber (who worked in Innsbruck) and Johann Heinrich Schmelzer (who was in the service of the court in Vienna). They are in three movements, modelled after the Venetian concerto, best-known from the oeuvre of Vivaldi. Rovatkay notes the folkloristic elements in these pieces, which may be hard to recognize for those who are not familiar with this kind of music. One may be inclined to consider these pieces as a kind of 'light' music, but that would be a mistake. These are substantial pieces, and some include quite some expression. The Pastorella with the addition 'Eisenstadt' is particularly good example. The Pastorella III/298 is a special case: it comprises only two movements, although the first is divided into two sections (tempo ordinario – largo). The second movement is a fugue. It is the only one of those performed here without a concertante organ part.

The second category from Werner's oeuvre that is included here is the Salve Regina. It is one of the most frequently-set texts in the history of Western music. The reason is that it belongs to the core of the Roman Catholic liturgy. It is one of the four Marian antiphons which are sung at different seasons in the liturgical calendar. The Salve Regina is sung from Trinity Sunday to Advent. It is not quite clear who the author is, but it seems to have its origin in the circles of the Cistercians. In Italy composers mostly set it for soprano solo with strings. Werner composed around sixty Salve Reginas, and the six settings that were selected for the present disc show the different ways he approached this text.

The two first settings performed here (III/104 and 127), for instance, are very different. The former is rather short (3:26), the latter more than twice as long (7:08). The vocal scoring is the same: SATB. The former has four sections: the two opening verses (Salve Regina, Ad te clamamus) are taken together; the latter is divided into five sections. In the former setting the second verse – "Ad te clamamus, exules filiae Evae, ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle" – is full of expression through the use of marked dissonances. In the word "suspiramus" the syllables are separated by short pauses. The second setting opens with a unisono of soprano and alto in plainchant with organ. The second verse is much more restrained in expression. The third verse – "Eia ergo" – has the form of an aria for tenor. The last verse – "O clemens, o pia, o dulcis Virgo Maria" – is very concise in the first setting and much more extended in the second. The Salve Regina with the addition 'Eisenstadt' is a solo for soprano, very much in the Italian tradition. The first and third sections include much coloratura. "Ad te clamamus" is set to a rising figure. The Salve Regina III/130 is the longest in the programme, and is divided into seven sections. It opens with an aria for alto (not soprano, as the track-list has it). The third section – "Ad te clamamus" – is an aria for bass in a wide range. In the fifth section the tenor is accompanied by strings, which now and then play pizzicato. The Salve Regina III/121 opens with a section for four voices, but the soprano is singled out here through virtuosic coloratura. The closing section – "O clemens" – is largely homophonic, and includes passages in which the two pairs of voices (SA/TB) sing in unison.

As a kind of bonus we get at the end of the programme the closing section of a larger-scale setting of the same text from 1729, for four voices and basso continuo. It is written in the stile antico, which was still often used in sacred music by Italian composers (Alessandro Scarlatti is a prominent example). That does not prevent Werner from producing a very expressive account of the closing phrase of this antiphon.

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Reginas, as the Virgin Mary played an important role in Christmas celebrations in Catholic regions of Europe. For modern ears the Pastorellas don't sound very 'Christmassy' and that makes this disc suitable for being played throughout the year. It is an impressive testimony of Werner's skills as a composer, in the field of vocal as well as instrumental music. His case is served ideally by the performers here. Four outstanding singers bring his Salve Reginas to life and fully explore their expressive features. Lajos Rovatkay delivers excellent accounts of the organ parts in the Pastorellas. La festa musicale's role is modest, but its playing is just what the repertoire needs. A second disc with music by Werner, which includes one of his Requiems, has already been released. I am looking forward to that one.



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Gregor Joseph Werner (1695-1766)

Salve Reginas, Pastorellas

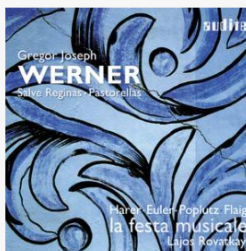
Magdalene Harer (soprano), Johannes Euler (alto), Georg Poplutz (tenor), Markus Flaig (bass)

la festa musicale/Lajos Rovatkay (organ)

rec. 2021, St Stephen's Collegiate Church, Hanover, Germany

Text and translation included

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