



Gregor Joseph Werner: Vol. II: Requiem

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New horizons for wind and brass

[...] Bringing to light unfamiliar repertory remains high on the agenda of HIP ensembles. Though a finite resource, many works remain unrecorded and await the opportunity to reach wider audiences. Particularly welcome, therefore, is la festa musicale's recording of Gregor Joseph Werner's Requiem in C minor (1763)—the striking texture of two trombones bringing it into relevance in this review, in Gregor Joseph Werner: Vol.II: Requiem (audite 97808, issued 2022). As Joseph Haydn's predecessor at the Esterházy court, Werner projects a powerful voice through his contrapuntal style and precedes many devices subsequently used in the requiems by Michael Haydn (1771) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1791), both of whom use the trombones to dramatic effect through the use of timbral doubling in the choir and more exposed passagework. One is left wondering how such a pioneering work has remained in the shadows for so long. la festa musicale's control of shaping creates a poignant framework for beautiful dissonances, interwoven by Voktett Hannover and an impressive solo quartet. [...]

What do these recordings tell us about the outlook for wind and brass in early music in the current climate? Firstly, they highlight the potential for new writing on old instruments in bringing people together and building a wider community; the crowd-funding approach for Northern Soul shows how a new work can revitalize and revisit old practices. Secondly, they demonstrate that new technical boundaries can be emulated and often broken—though performing artists of the 17th and 18th centuries reached the apogee of their crafts, one should not assume that the same accomplishments may not be achieved by performers today, despite the modern sound world within which we inhabit. Thirdly, they show the value of continued efforts to record unfamiliar repertory—Werner's Requiem must, surely, be heard as an essential precursor to those by Michael Haydn and Mozart and deserves more attention on the concert platform. The foreboding use of trombones, executed with grace by Alexander Brungert and Cas Gevers, provides one of the most tragic timbres of 18th-century writing. I find it a tantalizing opportunity to inspire a new work—one can only wonder what possibilities could emerge for a 21st-century requiem for chorus with trombones. With motivation and commitment, there is tremendous potential for wind and brass projects in early music: rich horizons indeed.