Moonstrung Air - Gregory Brown

Moonstrung Air - music by Gregory W Brown; New York Polyphony, The Crossing, Donald Nally, Eric Dudley; Navona Records

Reviewed by Robert Hugill on Feb 13 2015
Star rating: 4.0

Contemporary vocal music which showcases the intriguing and intelligent work by this American composer

I first came across Greg Brown's music when reviewing New York Polyphony's recording of his Missa Charles Darwin on Navona Records. Both the work and the music intrigued me, and I ended up helping to facilitate (and taking part in) the UK premiere of Missa Charles Darwin in a new version for mixed choir in a performance given by London Concord Singers and the late Malcolm Cottele. Now Navona Records has issued a complete disc of Brown's music so that New York Polyphony's recording of Missa Charles Darwin and Three American Folk Hymns has been teamed up with more of Brown's intriguing music, with The Crossing, conducted by Donald Nally, performing Five Women Bathing by Moonlight, Vidi Aquam, and Entrai Pastores Entrai along with a recording of Spring conducted by

Eric Dudley,

Gregory W. Brown lives and works in Western Massachusetts. He studied at the Hugh Hodgson School of Music (University of Georgia), Westminster Choir College and Amherst College, where he studied with Lewis Spratlan. His music is essentially tonal, and he writes sympathetically for the voice but that does not mean that he writes down or that his music is not complex. I know from my experience of singing Missa Charles Darwin that his style is in fact highly complex, whilst remaining tricky but achievable for an amateur group like London Concord Singers. Listening to the wider selection of Brown's music on this disc, you sense that he is familiar with and sympathetic to the style of well-made Renaissance polyphony beloved of many choristers. Brown also has an interesting view of what constitutes a settleable subject and text, so that the works on this disc challenge in a number of very satisfying ways.

Five women bathing by moonlight is a setting of a poem by Richard Wilbur, depicting a seaside party in the 1940's. The poet renders the real event as dreamlike and timeless, and it is these elements that Brown's setting picks up on. There is a lovely clarity to the sound of the choir, The Crossing which is a 24 member professional choir, but there is a clarity to the texture of Brown's writing too. His impulse is essentially lyric, but with passing dissonances and a feeling of well wrought polyphony. The piece is dreamlike, in a way which is sober and grave.

Vidi Aquam intriguingly sets text from a 16th century treatise (Del Beneficio di Giuso Christo Crucifisso) written by a group of Catholic reformers promoting an idea that would figure in the Reformation, the idea of sola fide, or 'by faith alone'. The treatise was translated from Italian into French, and then into English in 1675. Brown excerpted the translator's introduction from the English version and organized it into three sections. As a framing device, he uses the Roman Catholic chant Vidi Aquam. The work is written for choir and piano (played by John Grecia), and the texts view our relationship to the natural world. For the first movement, the choir's long intertwining lyrical lines are counterpointed by a mythtical piano writing. The second movement has a dramatic piano peroration before the choir comes in with what is a well-made part-song again counterpointed by the piano. The results are lyrical and highly expressive, though it has to be admitted that the resonant acoustic means that the choir's words do not come over as well as I could have wished. The movement also includes a lovely moment for solo voices. The movement ends with another piano peroration, this time including a figure like the tolling of a bell. The final movement combines quietly intense vocal lines with edgy piano chords, and though the lyrical music builds there is a highly strenuous counterpoint before all dies away.

Spring is performed by specially constituted vocal ensemble conducted by Eric Dudley. The text is a translation from the Ancient Greek of Anacreon. The music is more complex here, with opaque harmonies though still with a sense of transparency in the way the vocal lines are laid out. The structure uses canon in multiple forms, which helps to explain the sound world and the sense of continuous movement. It is an intense and austere piece.

Brown's Missa Charles Darwin uses the form of the mass with Introit, Kyrie, Gloria, Alleluia, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei but with a text taken from the principally writings of Charles Darwin. As a constructional device, Brown takes an initial melodic idea (sung unaccompanied
like chant) which is based on the DNA of Darwin's finches, and then subjects it to various procedures which emulate those of genetics (mutation, insertion, selection as well as the more standard musical ones of inversion and retrograde). This means that the musical texture very music evolves and whilst any one particular harmonic moment is not challenging, the harmonic movement is very much non-standard (quite a challenge for singers!) and the complexity can resemble on of Bach's denser fugues. That none of this matters is a tribute to the superb performance from New York Polyphony. They are an all male group (Geoffrey Williams, Steven Cadcott Wilson, Christopher Dylan Herbert and Craig Phillips) and the work was written specifically for them. And they are not only musical, but their diction is superb so that the fundamental emphasis of the piece, on the works of Charles Darwin, comes over (you can read my original review of this recording also on this blog).

The Crossing and Donald Nally return for Entrai, pastores entrail which is a traditional Portuguese Christmas Carol. The carol is included in a volume of transcriptions made by Fernando Lopes-Graça (1996-1994), the Portuguese composer and musicologist, and Michael Giacometti, and Brown says in his liner notes that he came to know and admire Lopes-Graça's work when he performed it as a singer and that the piece is very much an homage to Lopes-Graça. It opens with a single line, in a highly evocative ornamental chant-like melody and develops into something slow and lovely. The results are rather haunting.

For the final works on the disc we return to New York Polyphony, this time in Three American Folk Hymns, each a treatment of an American folk hymn: The Dying Californian, Sweet Hour of Prayer, The Morning Trumpet. Brown's treatments owe something to the sparseness and open harmonies of period arrangements and in these fine performances the three come over as strong and appealing.

Five Women Bathing in Moonlight [5:06]
Vidi Aquam
  • To Stir Up Our Wits [3:02]
  • Observing Nature [7:56]
  • Asking of Nature [5:00]

Spring [4:51]
Missa Charles Darwin
  • Introitus; Tropus Ad Kyrie [2:16]
  • Gloria [3:48]
  • Alleluia [3:07]
  • Credo [6:14]
  • Sanctus [4:10]
  • Agnus Dei [2:53]

Entrai, pastores, entrail [5:23]
Three American Folk Hymns
  • 'The Dying Californian [3:06]
  • Sweet Hour of Prayer [4:21]
  • 'The Morning Trumpet [3:51]

The Crossing, conductor Donald Nally
The Spring Ensemble, conductor Eric Dudley
New York Polyphony
The Crossing recorded July 18 2014 at Saint Peter's Church in the Great Valley in Malvern PA
New York Polyphony recorded September 30, and October 1, 2013 at American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York NY
NAVONA RECORDS NVS989 1CD [64.58]

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