

The other contemporary works are by Julia Wolfe – another psalm-setting, this time a verse from Psalm 34, *Guard my tongue* – and a series of short pieces by Pärt. Wolfe's piece is extremely stark and unremitting. It might be thought to resemble Pärt in some ways – most notably the way the (very short) text dictates the chordal and melodic structure – but its successive, imploring waves of sound produce a very different effect.

Pärt's Fátima-inspired *Drei Hirtenkinder*, on a verse from Psalm 8, has always struck me as somewhat enigmatic. It's over in a flash, but full of events. Both *Kleine Litanei* and *Virgencita* are more 'classical' Pärt, with their repeated invocations with frequently unexpected cadences and carefully balanced dissonances. *Habitare fratres in unum*, in spite of its Latin title, is a setting in Church Slavonic of Psalm 132 (133), and is another fascinating demonstration of the way different languages affect the composer's writing. Here there are clear echoes of the Russian choral tradition, though no chant is used and there is no direct quotation of any other music. *Alleluia tropus*, in honour of St Nicholas, is also in Slavonic, a setting of the *apolytikion* or dismissal hymn for the Saint's feast, with added Alleluias. The final piece on the album, *Ja ma kuulsin bääle ...* ('And I heard a voice ...'), is a setting in Estonian of a verse from the book of Revelation, and the clarity of that language means that the work has a brightness to it that reflects its description of the 'voice from heaven' and provides a suitably exultant finish to the sequence.

I have spoken about the contemporary pieces as though they were grouped together, but in fact the way to listen to this album is to go from beginning to end, hearing them interspersed with the *laude* as they are programmed. This repertoire, being entirely monophonic but full of magnificent melodies, gives all kinds of opportunity for different treatments, and Hillier uses the full range, from unaccompanied solo voice to melody with drone and organum-like parallel chords, and exploiting male and female voices separately and together. Ars Nova are, as usual, fully in command of both early and recent styles: this is a sparkling, thought-provoking recording of great originality.

Ivan Moody

'In Paradisum'

Albinoni/Giazotto The Beatitudes **Allegri** Miserere **Bruckner** Christus factus est **Caccini/Vavilov** Ave Maria **Danna** Life of Pi - Tsimtsum **Dove** Seek him that maketh the seven stars **Elgar** Requiem aeternam ('Nimrod') **Fauré**

Requiem, Op 48 - In Paradisum Lauridsen Les chansons des roses - Dirait-on **Lotti** Crucifixus **Mozart** Ave verum corpus, K618 **Rheinberger** Abendlied, Op 69 No 3 **Rutter** The Lord bless you and keep you **Shore** The Lord of the Rings - In Dreams **Stanford** The Blue Bird, Op 119 No 3 **Vangelis** 1492 - Conquest of Paradise **Victoria** Ave Maria **Whitacre** Lux aurumque **Schola Cantorum of the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School / Scott Price, Iestyn Evans** Aparté (P) AP228 (78' • DDD • T/t)



A regular in the West End, thanks to appearances at ENO and the Royal Opera, and often heard on Hollywood soundtracks including *Paddington* and *Life of Pi*, the Schola Cantorum of the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School isn't your average state comprehensive school choir. With professional men bolstering the lower lines and extensively trained boys on the top, it's perplexing how such an experienced ensemble could produce such an uneven album.

'In Paradisum', the choir's first release on Aparté, is explicitly programmed to bring the group's two musical worlds together. So on one hand you get music by Vangelis and Howard Shore, and on the other you get anthems by Lotti, Victoria and Mozart, with some Whitacre, Rutter and Lauridsen straddling the divide. It's a classic easy-listening affair, aimed squarely at the Classic FM market, which would be fine if the singing was consistently excellent.

The crossover market is a crowded place, and there's little here that hasn't already been done better elsewhere. There's a pleasant account of Stanford's *The Blue Bird* – a lovely light soloist supported by a well-blended choir – and both the counterpoint in Rheinberger's *Abendlied* and the smudgy cluster chords of Whitacre's *Lux aurumque* are carefully balanced. But other repertoire standards – Mozart's *Ave verum*, the 'In Paradisum' from Faure's Requiem, Victoria's double-choir *Ave Maria* – struggle audibly. Trebles sing consistently under the note, phrases sag and limp instead of driving through and there's a lack of impetus and a tendency towards rubato that makes everything feel slow, even if it isn't.

Choral arrangements of classical hits such as Elgar's 'Nimrod', Caccini's *Ave Maria* and Albinoni's *Adagio* (which all seem to sit slightly too high and demand too much sustained power from the upper voices) add little to the album.

Alexandra Coghlan

'Regards sur l'infini'

Debussy Proses Lyriques **Delbos** L'âme en bourgeois - No 1, Dors; No 8, Ai-je pu t'appeler de l'ombre **Dutilleux** Chanson de la déportée. Quatre Mélodies - No 3, Regards sur l'infini **Messiaen** Poèmes pour Mi **Saariaho** Quatre Instants - No 3, Parfum de l'instant. Il pleut **Katharine Dain** sop **Sam Armstrong** pf 7 Mountain Records (P) 7MNTN024 (69' • DDD • T/t)



At the start of the global pandemic, a lot of people went into lockdown with family,

many escaping the big cities to join parents of whom they see little during their usual working lives. Soprano Katharine Dain did something different. She locked down in Rotterdam with her friend and recital partner, pianist Sam Armstrong, initially to buy some extra rehearsal time ahead of upcoming performances. Like many of us, they assumed it would all be over in a few weeks.

At a time when life made little sense, Dain and Armstrong sought solace in music, exploring song repertoire as a 'meditation', a chance to work without deadlines, fully immersing in the music. This album is the direct result. 'Regards sur l'infini' is a collection of songs in French written at pivotal points in the lives of the composers or poets behind them. Messiaen's *Poèmes pour Mi* lies at its heart, immediately framed by two songs by its dedicatee, his first wife, Claire Delbos. These, in turn, are enveloped symmetrically by Debussy's *Proses lyriques*, Dutilleux and Saariaho. It is in many ways a lockdown chronicle, a focus on the present. Dain provides many of the translations herself and her booklet essay is sensitively penned, honest and thoughtful.

Dain's soprano has a slender, pure quality, fearless at altitude such as in Kaija Saariaho's 'Il pleut', where her instrument is beautifully controlled over the droplets of rain falling from Armstrong's piano accompaniment. His playing of the Debussy songs, in particular, has wonderful clarity. The fragility of the Messiaen cycle is carefully managed, Dain's soprano floating especially well in 'Ta voix'. The two Delbos songs from *L'âme en bourgeois* are rarities on disc; the cycle was premiered at the same recital as the *Poèmes pour Mi*. Dain and Armstrong's performance should encourage further exploration. Dutilleux's 'Regards sur l'infini' is possibly the most exquisite track on the album, melancholy, confessional.

Although many of these songs share the same mood, the same slow tempo,



Musical partners in lockdown: soprano Katharine Dain and pianist Sam Armstrong impress in a French programme

the same sparseness of texture, it gives the album an intimate, contemplative atmosphere – one for quiet evenings of reflection. **Mark Pullinger**

'Tyrannic Love'

G

Blow Poor Celadon, he sighs in vain. Venus and Adonis – Saraband for the Graces **J Clarke** Song on the Assumption **Eccles** The Comical History of Don Quixote: Part 1 – Sleep, poor youth (The Dirge); Part 2 – I burn, my brain consumes to ashes **D Purcell** Pausanias – My dearest, my fairest **H Purcell** Anacreon's Defeat, Z423. The Fairy Queen – Dance for the Fairies; Dance for the Green Men; Hornpipe. A Fool's Preferment – There's nothing so fatal as women. The History of Dioclesian – Dance of the Furies. The Indian Queen – Symphony; Seek not to know; Ye twice ten hundred deities. King Arthur – Chaconne; Hornpipe. Rule a Wife and Have a Wife – There's not a swain on the plain. Tyrannic Love – Hark! My Damilcar. The Virtuous Wife – Overture; Air; Slow Air. The Yorkshire Feast Song, Z333

Ensemble Les Surprises /

Louis-Noël Bestion de Camboulas

Alpha Ⓢ ALPHA663 (61' • DDD • T)



Seventeenth-century English composers knew a thing or two about

epidemics, restrictions, conflicts and the surge of cultural release that comes afterwards. There's a sense of seize-the-day elation and urgency about this recital from Louis-Noël Bestion de Camboulas and Ensemble Les Surprises that would be irresistible, even if it wasn't quite so apt.

Usually to be found exploring the less familiar names of the French Baroque, the period group have crossed the Channel for this exhilarating, no-holds-barred romp through vocal and instrumental music by Purcell, Blow, Eccles and Jeremiah Clarke. The theme is love, but there's nothing coy or sugary about either music or performances that embrace extremes of emotion and expression.

You get a good sense of the ensemble's vibrant sound in the opening Hornpipe from *King Arthur*. Oboes and bassoon buzz fruitily, their dance propelled along by glinting tambourine and guitar. But just when you think this might be a one-trick pony of a recording – all broad gestures and big rhythms – the Saraband for the Graces from Blow's *Venus and Adonis* arrests you with its restraint and elegance: a dance so subtle it's more of a thought than a movement, rocking almost imperceptibly beneath an edgily spare violin melody.

Much of this is theatre music, and in the absence of a stage Les Surprises supply all the drama. They're joined by soprano Eugénie Lefebvre and baritone Étienne Bazola – both idiomatic English speakers who can turn their hand to comedy (Bazola's 'There's nothing so fatal as woman' walks a clever line between pantomime and mad scene, while Lefebvre's 'There's not a swain in the plain' is wonderfully arch without ever losing beauty of tone) as neatly as tragedy.

The bravura mad scene 'I burn' from Eccles's *The Comical History of Don Quixote* takes no prisoners in Lefebvre's swooping, diving delivery, now distorting and chewing the text, now disarmingly simple, while Bazola's 'Poor Celadon' matches the accompanying chamber organ for crooned softness and reedy melancholy. But the frank sensuality of their duet 'My dearest, my fairest' is, if anything, outdone by the suggestive interweaving of the oboes in the Symphony from *The Indian Queen*, Lucile Tessier's matronly bassoon lingering close like an anxious chaperone.

There's delight after delight here, both in repertoire – which includes plenty of lesser-known treasures – and performances. This is one French invasion to welcome with open arms.

Alexandra Coghlan