

# Choral

## CHORAL CHOICE



## Remarkable performances of late Stravinsky works

Malcolm Hayes is bowled over by Cappella Amsterdam's exceptional clarity and control



Spareness and concentration: Cappella Amsterdam are both vivid and precise

### Stravinsky

#### Late Works

Cappella Amsterdam; Noord Nederlands Orkest/ Daniel Reuss

Pentatone PTC5187489 72:42 mins

'He always was and still is ahead of everybody.' The words of Stravinsky's musical assistant and colleague, Robert Craft, were written down the day before the master composer died in 1971, aged 88. And they pin down the quality that makes Stravinsky's late works so remarkable.

These could not be as they are without the examples of Webern's and Schoenberg's music, and

of the contemporary avant garde generation headed by Pierre Boulez. Yet *Threni* and *Requiem Canticles*, the two major statements here, combine their formidable spareness and concentration with a forward-looking mindset that feels more 'modern' than almost anything of their time – and this from the late-Romantic creator of *The Firebird*, composed half a century earlier.

This recording must contain some of the finest ever interpretations of these works: the

choral singing, especially, is exceptional in its clarity and super-precise tuning. Daniel Reuss's conducting brilliantly connects with the music's essence, its ultra-Russian, bell-like vividness, as in the grander passages of *Threni*. The orchestral playing, too, is top-flight: the 'Exaudi' movement of *Requiem Canticles* here comes across as perhaps the most purely beautiful music that even Stravinsky ever wrote.

And among a superlative sextet of soloists, tenor Guy Cutting excels in the central setting of *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* – 'Do not go gentle into that good night' – along with the

four solo string players.

The arrangements of Hugo Wolf's *Two Sacred Songs* were the last, death-haunted music Stravinsky completed; the lovely singing and artistry of mezzo-soprano Marianne Beate Kielland here makes the experience of hearing them achingly moving. ★★★★★

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Some of the finest ever interpretations of these works are on this album

### Elgar

#### The Dream of Gerontius

Allan Clayton, Jamie Barton, James Platt; London Philharmonic Orchestra & Choir, Hallé Choir/ Edward Gardner  
LPO LPO-0138 87 mins



This new Gerontius is taken from a BBC Proms performance in August 2022

which was widely praised by reviewers. It's a measure of how radically Paul McCreesh, in his 2024 period-instrument rendition, has changed perceptions of the work that the London Philharmonic's playing of the *Prelude* now seems notably late-Romantic in flavour, with plentiful string vibrato and a more lush tonal palette. Whether that approach, or McCreesh's leaner textures, works better, is partially a matter of personal taste – sample before buying, if possible. The Gerontiuses are strikingly different too. Nicky Spence, for McCreesh, is in many ways the more subtly nuanced of the two, sounding more vulnerable and 'near to death' on his first entry. Clayton, though, packs a more visceral punch – he had, of course, the Albert Hall to fill – and there's no denying the heady thrill of his delivery in key moments such as 'Take me away'.

Jamie Barton is an excellent Angel, her intelligence animating the potentially flat-footed episode at the beginning of Part Two where the Purgatorial path is outlined to Gerontius. James Platt is an imposing Priest and Angel of the Agony, near-Wagnerian in his sonorities. The choirs of the London Philharmonic and Hallé orchestras combine impressively, bringing to 'Rescue him' the ardour of a Verdi chorus and a palpable luminosity. The Demons's scornful tauntings – notoriously difficult to bring off convincingly – are blunted by the difficulties of recording big choirs clearly in the cavernous Albert Hall acoustic, and overall, the sound is not ideally sharp and transparent. But the impact of Edward Gardner's cogent, understanding interpretation still cuts vividly through; it must have been quite an experience on the evening. Terry Blain ★★★★★

## Fauré • Rossini • Schubert et al

### Requiem and other choral works

Jean-Gabriel Saint-Martin, Isaure Brunner; Chœur de l'Opéra Royal, Orchestre de l'Opéra Royal/Victor Jacob  
Château de Versailles CVS156  
78:24 mins



An imaginative exploration of death. The focus is Fauré's Requiem, the choir and

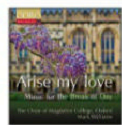
orchestra of Versailles's Opera Royal making a rare foray into the 19th century. It emerges from a sequence of infrequently heard choral songs concerning mortality, inventively curated by conductor Victor Jacob. There is a palpable sense of occasion from Rossini's funeral song for 'my poor friend Meyerbeer'. One of his *Morceaux réservés* (private pieces), male voices are accompanied only by a drum whose long, short, short rhythm also underpins Schubert's *Gesang der Geister über den Wassern* as well as featuring in Rheinberger's 'Abendlied' and Brahms's *Vier Gesänge*. The latter are an inspired choice, their unusual scoring for women's voices, two horns and harp providing a striking sonic link with the Fauré.

Presented in the intimately scored 1893 'church' version, this is a well-crafted performance of the Requiem. The Introitus veers close to the wallowing side of portentous, but the rest flows with a natural grace. A sense of a simple reverence prevails, even if Fauré's preference for sopranos rather than trebles should be remembered on encountering the Opera Royal's full-bodied upper voices in passages such as the climax of the Offertoire. Sadly, neither soloist quite hits the mark, baritone Jean-Gabriel Saint-Martin being periodically tremulous while soprano Isaure Brunner is curiously unaffected in the 'Pie Jesu'. The *Cantique de Jean Racine* provides a radiant addendum, the mildly chuffing action of the Chapelle Royale organ adding poignancy as well as creating a faint echo of the recital's opening drum. **Christopher Dingle ★★★★★**

## Arise my love

Works by Gabriel Jackson, Tallis, Charlotte Bray, Britten et al

The Choir of Magdalen College, Oxford/Mark Williams  
Coro COR16216 62:05 mins



Magdalen's debut album for CORO, *Peace I leave with you*, explored music for the end of the day – home

territory for a choir steeped in the traditions of Evensong. Its successor, *Arise my love*, requires a greater imaginative leap. Morning music, as Magdalen's Informator Choristarum Mark Williams admits, is harder to define in an Anglican context. Accordingly, the programme approaches the 'break of day' obliquely, as a state of mind: light, renewal, resurrection, the thrill of being newly awake.

This freer approach allows for a varied programme, spanning five centuries of music that might plausibly be heard within Magdalen's 15th-century chapel. Sheppard's austere *Haec dies* roots the disc firmly in the college's own past – the composer was Williams's predecessor at Magdalen four centuries ago. Tallis's jewel-like *O nata lux* glows with unforced radiance. Britten's *Festival Te Deum* brings a jolt of nervous energy, Walton's *Jubilata Deo* bristles with confidence, and Tavener's *As One Who Has Slept* rises drowsily from half-conscious slumber.

The choir sings with a classic English cathedral sound: soft-edged attack, little concern for hyper-precision, and a treble sound marked by a gentle, airy breathiness. In Magdalen Chapel's resonant acoustic, the effect is luminous, if a little fuzzy at times.

The programme's contrasts are deft: Stainer's winsome *How beautiful upon the mountains* skirts sentimentality but is kept on a tight rein, while Leighton's *God's Grandeur* bites sharply into Gerard Manley Hopkins's bruised imagery. After the haunting sparseness of Judith Weir's *Vertue*, Jonathan Dove's vigorous *Ecce Beatam Lucem* returns us to scintillating sunshine.

Not every piece convinces as true 'morning' music, but as a meditation on waking – spiritual, emotional and literal – this is a thoughtful and warmly sung collection with broad appeal.

**Ashutosh Khandekar ★★★★★**

## O Maria, virgo pia

Works by Judith Bingham, David Maw, David Briggs et al

The Choir of Oriol College, Oxford/David Maw

Convivium CRI17 72:25 mins



As the 19th-century composer and Oriol alumnus Edmund Fellowes once noted, in

his day his alma mater was 'in no sense a musical college'. On the evidence of this recording, that situation has changed for the better, with 700-year-old Oriol joining the likes of nearby Merton and Queen's in boasting a highly polished mixed-voice college choir.

With that notable anniversary in mind, director of music David Maw has put together an engaging programme that nods to significant figures and occasions in Oriol's history. Earliest of these is the opening 13th-century *O Maria, virgo pia* sequence which, in circulation

at the time of Oriol's founding, here provides the basis for Judith Bingham's 2015 setting of the Magnificat and Cheryl Frances-Hoad's recent *O Maria, virgo pia*, written to mark, respectively, the 30th and 40th anniversaries of women being admitted to the college.

Alongside other contemporary pieces, Fellowes's pleasingly melodious Victorian style is heard in his four-movement *Hymn of the Third Choir* for choir, organ and string quartet, while the 1958 setting of Psalm 150 by fellow Oriol graduate Herbert Chappell (of TV score fame) is a more ebullient, strident affair. Throughout, the choir's warm, unshowy sound is beautifully balanced, the perfect foil to Grace Davidson's immaculate solo line in the Bingham Magnificat.

And further credit, too, to David Maw for informative sleeve notes that provide a first-rate guide to exploring this album of largely unfamiliar music. **Jeremy Pound ★★★★★**

## BRIEF NOTES

### Puccini *Messa di Gloria, Capriccio sinfonico & other works*

Alejandro Del Angel et al; Aalto Theatre Opera Chorus, Essen Philharmonic Orchestra & Choir/Andrea Sanguineti Naxos 8574685 75 mins



This record sheds a welcome light on Puccini in his formative years, a composer already fluent in drama. The *Preludio a Orchestra* and *Capriccio sinfonico* sparkle with supple strings and alert wind and brass, whilst the *Messa di Gloria* confirms Puccini's early mastery of choral writing in a sacred setting. At times the choir feels weighty, but performances always retain their flair. **Miranda Bardsley ★★★★★**

### In the Poet's Garden Works by John Rutter

Roderick Williams, Melanie Marshall et al; The Cambridge Singers, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/John Rutter Collegium COLCD 141 73 mins



'Second only to music, words are my great love,' writes Rutter of these attractive settings of Shakespeare, Wordsworth et al. If *London Town's* unison voices are a little 'school production', there are fascinating stylistic mismatches in the *Three Shakespeare Songs*, which embrace jazzy rhythms and harmonies. And there's lovely harp accompaniment from Catrin Finch in *Dancing Tree*. **Charlotte Smith ★★★★★**

### Light out of Darkness Choral Music by Edward Elgar

Callum Knox; Chapel Choir of the Royal Hospital Chelsea/William Vann (director) SOMM SOMMCD 0714 77 mins



From oratorio choruses to part songs and psalms, spread over several decades, this is an excellent introduction to Elgar's choral works. At times, such as in the gorgeous 'The Spirit of the Lord', the relatively small choral forces are spread a little thin, but this is more than made up for by exceptionally polished delivery throughout. **Jeremy Pound ★★★★★**