



simone de bonifont
missa pro mortuis
huelgas ensemble
paul van nevel



Huelgas Ensemble / Paul Van Nevel *Simone de Bonifont: Missa Pro mortuis*

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It's rare to see a recording of Renaissance polyphony hit the classical best-seller charts, but this one has, and even from a cursory listen, it's easy to see why. The music on the album is almost completely unknown, and the performances by the venerable [Huelgas Ensemble](#) are gorgeous. On top of this, the sound, recorded live at Belgium's Park Abbey, is wonderfully clear. For Renaissance fans, the big news here will be the *Missa pro mortuis*, or requiem mass, of composer [Simone de Bonifont](#) (born ca. 1500). This composer will be unfamiliar even to serious Renaissance music lovers. He was from the Auvergne region, far out of the French mainstream, and only four of his compositions have survived. What's heard here suggests that it's worth looking around for more: the style of the mass is unique, with the top line often in chant-like long notes (although it is not a *cantus firmus* mass) while the other voices add more elaborate polyphony beneath. Certain turns of phrase, especially in the Offertorium, are illustrated with dissonance striking for mid-16th century France, and the text is treated with notable formal freedom. General listeners have much to celebrate too. The album closes with four separate settings of the same text, "*Media vita in morte sumus*." The grim idea that in the middle of life we are already dead, attributed to a monk called [Notker the Stutterer](#), is familiar for those from theologians to ordinary Mexicans selling Day of the Dead figures in a marketplace, but it's susceptible to a variety of musical treatments, and combining multiple settings of the same text is not as common on Renaissance recordings as one might think it would be. Listen to each of the four settings, one of which is in German ([Martin Luther](#) himself translated the text). Each one has a different flavor, concluding with the magnificently somber version by [Nicolas Gombert](#). This is a recording of High Renaissance choral music that will be treasured by those who acquire it.

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