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Author: Richard Whitehouse

No genre (other than opera) is without its substantial contribution from Reger, and his music for choir is correspondingly extensive. This new anthology from the Huelgas Ensemble ranges widely both chronologically and stylistically, resulting in the most representative collection now available.

The unaffected manner of the opening chorale 'Mit Fried und Freud' sets the tone for all that follows – melancholic, maybe, but suffused with radiance. Hence the bittersweet poise of the folk song 'Es waren zwei Königskinder' or enfolding fatalism of the sacred song 'Der Mensch lebt und bestehet' which follow, then the chaste elegance drawn from a Marian text by Novalis, 'Ich sehe dich in tausend Bildern'. The overlapping of female voices in 'Abendgang im Lenz' perfectly complements the warm resignation of its text, as too the ruminative calm found in 'Zur Nacht'. The ensuing motet, 'Tod, wie bitter bist du', one of Reger's most exacting in its harmonic intricacy and its myriad textural nuance, is a triumph of methodical if never effortful progress towards the certainty of redemption, the wistful regret of the folk song 'Das Sternlein' then the graceful affirmation of the hymn 'Lass mich dein sein und bleiben' that follow seeming the more touching for their restraint. The plaintive and imploring expression of the next two items touches on an ambivalence developed in the part-song 'Trost' – the earliest piece here, yet already characteristic in its density and fervency of response. The valedictory acceptance of 'Abschiedslied' ends this sequence with a fitting sense of having come emotionally full circle.

Throughout, the singing of the Huelgas Ensemble under Paul Van Nevel yields a clarity and accuracy such as banishes any thought of that turgidity still routinely levelled at Reger's writing (choral or otherwise), with the pianism of Jos van Immerseel on a refurbished Bechstein only slightly older than Reger aiding but never over-pointing tonal definition. Clearly while not clinically recorded and thoughtfully annotated, this is no doubt a prime recommendation for those who have hesitated to explore a crucial yet still under-appreciated facet of the composer's output.

Richard Whitehouse, 05/2024