

CD: Simone de Bonfont - Missa pro mortuis : review

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Very little is known of the life or work of Simone de Bonfont, born around 1500, master of music at the Cathedral of Clermont-Ferrand. However, this fine five-part Mass for the Dead has been preserved, published in a Paris choirbook of 1556 – its title page reproduced here in the booklet. Its five voices consist of cantus, high tenor, two low tenor and bass lines, the upper voice providing a cantus firmus over the busier polyphonic lines of the lower voices. Its performance here from Van Nevel's ensemble is outstanding – both heartfelt and technically impeccable. So it would be most interesting to hear more by the composer but sadly, as Van Nevel tells us in his very informative booklet essay, this and three chansons are all the music known today from this very impressive musician.

Paul van Nevel's Huelgas Ensemble, singing with two voices per part, are well equipped to perform the work, with the exemplary sound, balance and vocal purity which they always show in renaissance music. This is a fine Requiem Mass, predominantly poised, consolatory in mood but with occasional striking dissonances. Completing the programme in similar vein, it's followed by four different settings of the 'Media vita in morte sumus' text, from Arnold von Bruck (in German), Jacobus de Kerle, Orlandus Lassus and Nicolas Gombert. I especially appreciated the graceful, soaring lines of the Lassus work, as well as Gombert's opening of rich, low-voiced textures.

This is an excellent live recording from the abbey church in Leuven, Belgium, with no audible sounds at all from the audience. Texts and translations are included.

Stephen Midgley