

There is also admirable scholarship from **Alexander Grychtolik**, whose specialism is speculative scholarly reconstructions of lost Bach works. All that survives of *Erwählte Pleissenstadt* (Cantata No 216a) is a rough draft of the words, written out by Bach's pupil Meissner. Two solo singers play the parts of Apollo (tenor Daniel Johannsen) and Mercury (countertenor Franz Vitzthum), their panegyric remarks making explicit the glory and prosperity of Leipzig; they sing together and individually with arresting shapeliness in praise of how the city on the river Pleisse gleams contentedly above all other great cities of classical antiquity. The substantial solo soprano cantata *O angenehme Melodei* (No 210a) is an exposition on the virtues of music that was designed in homage to Duke Christian of Saxe-Weissenfels on the occasion of his visit to Leipzig in 1729. Only a printed libretto and the soprano part survive but most of the music of the arias (not recitatives) can be reconstructed from their later parodies in the wedding cantata *O holder Tag, erwünschte Zeit* (No 210). Grychtolik conjectures that the soloist was none other than Anna Magdalena Bach, who before her marriage had been a court singer at Weissenfels. Katja Stuber's pure-toned singing and unaffected delivery of the poetry is creditable throughout all five contrasting arias, most notably a restful description of music as a panacea for all ills (a message supported by lovely *concertante* violin- and oboe d'amore-playing). The pleasure afforded by **Deutsche Hofmusik's** accomplished performances is diminished modestly by the heavily reverberant church acoustic swamping the singers. **C**

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THE RECORDINGS



JS Bach Cantatas, Vol 6
Montreal Baroque / Milnes
ATMA Classique © ACD2 2406



JS Bach 'La Cité Céleste'
Ensemble Alia Mens / Spilmont
Paraty © PARATY916157



JC Bach Cantatas Nos 79 & 126, etc
Gächinger Cantorey / Rademann
Carus © CARUS83 311



JS Bach 'Angenehme Melodei'
Deutsche Hofmusik / Grychtolik
DHM © 88985 41052-2



This is a collection of Latvian choral music selected in honour of the

centenary of the independence of Latvia. As conductor Kaspars Putniņš says in his introductory note: 'The majority of Latvian conductors have probably grown up with these songs whose imagery, sound and colour are deeply encoded in our consciousness ... Working on this album, I have felt as if I am writing a love letter.'

It sounds that way. One is gripped by the very first track, the atmospheric, insistent prophecy that is 'Senatne' ('Long Ago') by Emīls Darziņš (1875-1910), every nuance of which is captured by the Latvian Radio Choir. Did they weep while recording the second song by Darziņš, 'Mēness staro stīgo' ('Moonbeams')? I did. They sing with every fibre of their being.

There is, in fact, something extraordinary about Latvian choirs: they sing as though their very lives depend on it, and when they are singing Latvian music their immediate connection with the language makes this even more apparent. There is both Nordic clarity and Slavic profundity to be heard in the sound of a Latvian choir, and there is also what I might call a poetic sense, an instinctive knowledge of how to phrase. All this is beautifully, movingly evident on this disc. All five of the composers recorded here are outstanding but what stays with me is the music by Darziņš and the wonderful, disturbing 'Bīķeris miroņu salā' ('The Goblet on the Isle of the Dead') by Jānis Zalītiņš. At all events, this is a celebration of Latvian choral music that should not be missed. As Putniņš also writes, 'Many returns of the day, dear Latvia!' **Ivan Moody**

'Reformation 1517-2017'

JS Bach Cantatas - No 79, *Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild*; No 80, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* **Brahms** *Warum ist das Licht gegeben*, Op 74 No 1 **Croft** *O God, our help in ages past* **Cruiger** *Now thank we all our God* **Luther** *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*. **Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin** **Mendelssohn** *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* **Neumark** *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* **Vaughan Williams** *Lord, thou hast been our refuge*

Choir of Clare College, Cambridge;
Clare Baroque / Graham Ross
Harmonia Mundi © HMM90 2265 (73' • DDD • T/t)



The face of Martin Luther stares out from the cover of this

latest disc from the Choir of Clare College, Cambridge, but not as we know it. Lucas Cranach's famous portrait is distorted, fragmented and intersected into Matthias Koeppel's neo-Cubist Luther. The Reformation-themed works included here may attempt nothing so radical but the historical long view that pairs Bach cantatas with not only Mendelssohn and Brahms but also Vaughan Williams makes for an equally interesting shift of perspective.

You only have to look down the names of the soloists – Mary Bevan, Robin Blaze, Nicholas Mulroy, Neal Davies – and the members of Clare Baroque, led by Margaret Faultless and including the likes of Katharina Spreckelsen and Stephen Farr, to get a sense of the quality on offer here. The instrumental playing is, well, pretty faultless, whether in Rachel Chaplin's introspective oboe da caccia in Bach's *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* or the characteristic brass-playing in *Gott der Herr ist Son und Schild*.

The choir themselves, conducted by music director Graham Ross, bring all their customary precision and purity to the Bach, but it's once they arrive at the later repertoire – Brahms's *Warum ist das Licht gegeben?*, Mendelssohn's *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* and Vaughan Williams's *Lord, thou hast been our refuge* – that they really come into their own. Faced with the busy counterpoint of movements like the opening chorus of *Ein feste Burg*, these young voices in comparatively small numbers get a bit diffuse and we lose the vertical clarity.

But the darker-hued Brahms glows with love and care, its extended opening movement shaped with an eye to sonic drama, and the Vaughan Williams balances its solo and choral forces to striking effect, pacing this slow-burn anthem so that when we arrive at the final iteration of William Croft's great tune with trumpet and organ there's a real sense of ecstasy and release – faith finally rewarded.

Alexandra Coghlan

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