



REVIEW, November 2016

Bernardino de RIBERA (c.1520 - 1580?)

Magnificats & Motets

Rex autem David [4:43]

Gloriosae virginis Mariae [3:45]

Beata mater [3:52]

Dimitte me ergo [4:02]

[plainchant] *Non vos relinquam orphanos*, antiphon [0:45]

Magnificat primus tonus I [9:20]

[plainchant] *Non vos relinquam orphanos*, antiphon [0:54]

Vox in Rama [3:50]

Regina caeli [2:51]

[plainchant] *O rex gloriae*, antiphon [1:05]

Magnificat secundus tonus I [9:25]

[plainchant] *O rex gloriae*, antiphon [1:05]

Virgo prudentissima [5:16]

Conserva me, Domine [6:32]

Assumpsit Jesus Petrum [3:18]

[plainchant] *In ferventis*, antiphon [0:59]

Magnificat quartus tonus II [9:23]

[plainchant] *In ferventis*, antiphon [1:06]

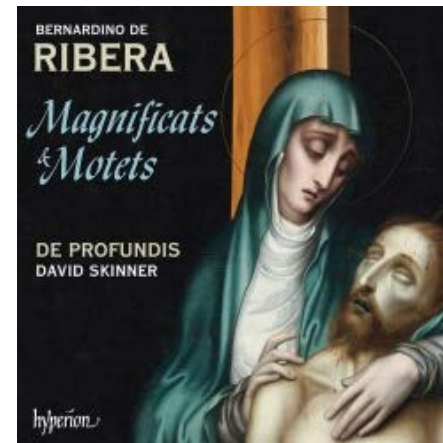
Hodie completi sunt dies Pentecostes [4:29]

De Profundis/David Skinner

rec. May 2014, St George's Church, Chesterton,
Cambridge, UK DDD

Texts and translations included

HYPERION CDA68141 [76:51]



Bernardino de Ribera is one of a number of composers from the Spanish Golden Age who are almost completely overshadowed by the towering figures of Guerrero and Victoria and, from a previous generation, Morales. Therefore, this disc which includes his complete extant music, is most welcome. However, it leaves a bit of a bitter taste. That has nothing to do with the quality of the music or the standard of performance but with the state of affairs in regard to his oeuvre.

Ribera was born in Játiva and received his first lessons in music from his father, who was the *maestro de capilla* of the Cathedral. In 1559 he was appointed *maestro de capilla* at Avila Cathedral where Victoria was one of his pupils. In 1562 he moved to Toledo. In the early 1570s his health deteriorated; from February 1571 Andrés de Torrentes substituted for him and in December of that year the latter succeeded him as *maestro de capilla*. However, it seems that after a couple of years he recovered; according to recent research he acted as *maestro de capilla* at Murcia Cathedral from 1572 to 1580, probably the year of his death.

Ribera's works have been preserved in a choirbook which is part of the archives of Toledo Cathedral. It is a large book consisting of 159 parchment folios which include "exquisite headings and decorated initials", as Bruno Turner writes in his liner-notes. Unfortunately this quality is the reason that it is heavily damaged. Probably in the 18th century whole folios were sliced out and many of the elaborate initials of the texts cut out, "thus creating holes which have swallowed the notation on the reverse". As a result a pretty large number of compositions are so heavily damaged that it is impossible to reconstruct them for performance. Among them are two complete masses: twelve folios have been torn from this part of the manuscript and there are holes in the remaining pages.

As far as the motets are concerned, things look a little better. In some of them so little is missing that it is not too hard to reconstruct them, in one case a missing page has been found elsewhere which allowed for the restoration of the opening of *Regina caeli*. The opening of *Gloriosae virginis Mariae* is also missing, but this could be reconstructed. Ribera wrote eight *Magnificats*, or at least had planned to do so. The choirbook includes only four settings; whether the remaining four were ever written is impossible to say. Only three are in such a state that they can be performed.

These three Magnificat settings are embraced by the appropriate plainsong antiphons. This is an element of 'liturgical reconstruction' which is mostly missing in recordings of renaissance polyphony. It helps to understand such pieces as liturgical works, not music for a concert performance.

Vox in Rama is one of many settings of this text from the Renaissance. These often offer something special, largely due to the highly emotional content: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and wailing: Rachel lamenting her sons; and she will not be consoled, for they are no more". It is a text from Matthew 2 which describes the Massacre of the Innocents that is also the subject of a feast in the Christian tradition, known as Holy Innocents Day. Ribera's setting includes no fewer than 26 repeated cries of "Rachel", not separately but interwoven with the musical fabric. *Rex autem David* deals with another biblical story which was often taken as the subject of composition: the mourning of King David over his son Absalom. Ribera here repeats the words "Absalom, fili mi" (Absalom, my son) eleven times, on a figure comprising descending semitones. This leads to an amount of chromaticism which was highly unusual at the time. It explains why in the Codex the sharps were erased. The copyist probably assumed that these were an error which needed to be corrected. Very different in mood is the energetic *Assumpsit Jesus Petrum* which is an antiphon at Vespers for the Transfiguration of our Lord (6 August).

De Profundis is a vocal ensemble which was founded in 2011. In this recording it comprises 25 male voices, from alto to bass. Whether that is in line with the historical circumstances is probably impossible to say. It seems unlikely that in Cathedrals liturgical music was sung with one voice per part as in some modern recordings. The notes don't tell us whether any transposition has taken place

to allow for the top lines to be sung by male altos. Another matter of debate is the participation of instruments. In some recordings instruments play *colla voce*, in others low instruments like dulcian, harp and organ are used. Some scholars believe that this was a widespread practice but others have different opinions. Here all the music is performed *a cappella*. The singing is fine and the qualities of the pieces by Ribera come off very well. However, sometimes I found the singing a little too straightforward. I would have liked a bit more flexibility, also in regard to dynamics.

However, this disc is of major importance: with the exception of *Beata mater* all the pieces on the programme have been recorded for the first time. This recording makes it crystal clear that Ribera was an excellent composer. It is to be hoped that his music will become available so that other ensembles will be able to include his music in their repertoire.

Johan van Veen

www.musica-dei-donum.org

twitter.com/johanvanveen