

My Beloved's Voice
The Choirs of Jesus College Cambridge
Directed by Mark Williams
Robert Dixon and Benjamin Morris (organ)
Signum, 2014: SIGCD370

Jesus College, Cambridge, has 'choirs' rather than a choir: the all-male Chapel Choir with its boy trebles, the mixed College Choir, and a Combined Choir that brings both groups together. 'My Beloved's Voice' features all three, taking advantage of three subtly different sonorities to explore repertoire that ranges from Renaissance polyphony to violet-scented Victoriana and contemporary works.

Running as a connecting thread through this wide-ranging music is the Song of Solomon with its fecund imagery of fruits and vines, and ecstatic portraits of the poet's beloved. It's a text that has prompted even the most severe of composers to purple polyphony, and the danger in a collection like this is that it becomes over-rich, lacking the dramatic variety of a satisfying programme.

The disc unfolds, however, in ebbing arcs of emotion, the rougher simplicity of boys' voices cutting the cloying sweetness of Casals's frankly sentimental *Nigra sum*, while the adult voices of the College Choir risk a hazily exquisite blend for Clemens's *Ego flos campi* and find particular richness for Howard Skempton's *Rise up my love*. The four anthems by Skempton are a particular highlight, setting text with an evocative sensitivity, delicately handled.

Although there are some choral monuments on the disc (Durufle's *Ubi caritas*; Walton's ubiquitous wedding anthem *Set me as a seal*), for the most part the path is one less-travelled, wending its way past comparative rarities such as Finzi's *My lovely one*, Brumel's *Sicut lilium* and Grieg's *How fair is thy face*, that all add up to a disc whose love songs are as fresh and lovely as their texts.

Alexandra Coghlan, Gramophone

The Choir of Jesus College Cambridge, directed by Mark Williams, perform an evocative selection of choral works inspired in varying ways by songs of Solomon. Superlative singing.

Gavin Engelbrecht, The Northern Echo

Dominated by settings of the Song of Songs, the repertoire here spans five centuries, from Antoine Brumel's masterpiece *Sicut Lilium* and an *Anima Mea* setting by Martin de Rivafranca, to a beautiful quartet by Howard Skempton, Nico Muhly's *Set me as a seal* and Robert Walker's *The Apple Tree*. Sung with exquisite blend and shape.

Stephen Pettit, The Sunday Times

A sacred program focused on love is certainly intriguing, and it proves entirely worthwhile. This is so far, my choral disc of the year for 2014, Not only are the choirs of Jesus College Cambridge uniformly excellent in their 19 selections, but they daringly chart a course over nearly 500 years of music. And what a choral program at Jesus College! Just when I thought I could ignore British choirs until Advent, along comes this stunningly resonant – but amazingly clear – disc from Signum Classics. Dynamic, blended, and musically involved, the diction is actually comprehensible despite the acoustics.

There are two choirs at Jesus College, both wonderful. The Chapel Choir is all boys. There are both men and women in the College Choir, founded as late as 1982. In English and Latin, these forces shine in whatever combination the music requires. Better yet, there is none of that stereotypically English stuffiness that occasionally bogs down choral albums from the UK. There is real emotion in this program, an easily discernable joy in singing these pieces that proves utterly engaging. Mixing contemporary settings with choral classics proves inspired, although my ears found only the Wesley and Durufle truly familiar. Elsewhere, the music ranges effortlessly from Grieg to Walton, each piece given exceptional care and concern for phrasing and text.

The first and second sections of the program are sensibly split with a Vierne organ piece, but you can frankly sit down and absorb the entire hour-long program without any fatigue. I must confess that listening to exclusively trebles for a long period is like doing the same with flute; I can't. So the ever shifting mix of voices not only contrasts the sound of the choral scorings, but makes it easier to appreciate the varied ways in which different composers have set the same texts within this program.

The way that William Walton harks back to English choral tradition with *Set me as a seal* couldn't be more stylistically different than Nico Muhly's very modern and meditative version. Both are moving in their own way. Likewise, Healey Willan's direct and motet-like *Rise up my love* contrasts markedly with Howard Skempton's own take, that feels a little like John Rutter (no shame in that). Durufle's *Ubi Caritas* has rarely sounded so transparent, while Casals provides an unexpected treat for the choir's treble voices. I was amazed that the great cellist had written choral music in an earlier review; to know

there is more to discover is a joy. I was even moved by *Blessed be the God & Father*, so lovingly sung as here. It not only ends the program with nod to a great tradition, but you can actually sing along, so clear are the words. Should you need them, texts are included.

Brian Wigman, *Classical.net*

You will certainly get your money's worth with this recording: 20 pieces from the 16th century to today, all drawing upon the idea of the love song in liturgy, specifically from the wonderfully sensual Song of Solomon with its invocation to "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away". Shame, then, that the singing is not more special. There is plenty to admire here – particularly Mark Williams's handling of four Howard Skempton anthems and Edward Bairstow's masterly miniature, *I Sat Down Under His Shadow* – but the interpretations are in the main workmanlike rather than wondrous. And while it's difficult to resist SS Wesley's triumphant *Blessed Be the God and Father*, with its glorious treble solo, it seems a bit of a cheat to include it.

Stephen Pritchard, *The Guardian*

This CD features both the Jesus College Choir (top line women) and the all-male Chapel Choir. The two sounds are well differentiated, the fresh clarity of the boys contrasting with the more mature sounds of the young women. This cleverly devised programme of sacred love songs relies heavily on the *Song of Solomon* for texts, the music ranging from the 16th century to the present day. Each piece is well-crafted, the most notable being the early, beguiling clarity of Brumel, Clemens non Papa and Martin de Rivafrecha, Casals's *Nigra sum*, the simplicity of Duruflé's *Ubi caritas* and the stunning individuality of Nico Muhly's *Set me as a seal*, with a unique piano accompaniment that complements the vocal lines.

Shirley Ratcliffe, *Choir & Organ*

Wide ranging survey of settings of the Song of Songs in fine performances.

This new disc from the choirs of Jesus College, Cambridge, director Mark Williams, on the Signum Classics label, pulls together an eclectic selection of settings of the Song of Songs (with some excursions). The programme mixes early pieces by Antoine Brumel, Matrin di Rivafrecha and Clemens non Papa with 20th century works by Pablo Casals, Healey Willan, Edward Bairstow, William Walton, Gerald Finzi, Edvard Grieg, Patrick Hadley, Maurice Duruflé and contemporary pieces by Howard Skempton, Nico Muhly and Robert Walker. Plus a short excursion into the 19th century for SS Wesley.

As on their previous disc, both choirs are represented on the disc. The chapel choir, which is men and boys, and the college choir, which is men and women, with male altos, tenors and basses being common to both choirs. The majority of works on the disc are performed by the college choir, with the chapel choir singing three items, the treble choristers sing one item on their own, and the combined choirs sing three items. There is also an organ solo from Robert Dixon.

The disc opens with the college choir singing *Sicut Liliun* by Antoine Brumel (1460 - 1515), the earliest piece on the disc. It is a short piece, but slow, poised and beautifully contemplative. The combined choirs (with Benjamin Morris on organ) follow this with *As the apple tree* by Robert Walker (born 1946). Walker is a former organ scholar at Jesus College. The work was written in 1985 (for his nephew's wedding). Walker's style is predominantly consonant, and the piece grows from a plainchant-like phrase into a more developed piece, with powerful moments.

My beloved spake by Patrick Hadley (1899-1973) is sung by the chapel choir. Hadley was a pupil of RVW and this setting dates from 1938. After a dramatic opening, the work is full of lovely harmonies and fades after a full climax.

The next group of works are all sung by the college choir. Maurice Duruflé's *Ubi Caritas* is based on the plainchant melody which Duruflé harmonises and here received a poised and beautifully shaped performance.

Howard Skempton's (born 1947) *Rise up my Love* consists of four short movements sets words from the Song of Songs, commissioned in 2002 by the Estonian Philharmonic. *Rise up my Love* is beautifully evocative in a melodic romantic style. *How fair is thy love* is sung by male voices, deep, dark and chant-like. *My beloved is gone down* is for women's voice, very much an attractive part-song. Finally, *How fair and how pleasant* is full of rich harmonies.

The combined choirs sing *Set me as a seal* by Nico Mulhy (born 1981), written in 2003 and using both Hebrew and English words. The work has a lovely romantic sweep to the vocal lines which contrasts with the percussive piano part (played by Benjamin Morris).

The college choir performs *Ego flos campi* by Clemens non Papa (1510 - 1556), combining a finely balanced poised performance with a full, yet fine-grained sound.

Robert Dixon then plays the *Aubade* from *Pieces de Fantaisie* by Louis Vierne (1870 - 1937). The work has a nice fluid feel with fascinating, wandering chromatic harmonies.

The college choir then sings a pair of anthems by Healey Willan (1880 - 1968). Though British, Willan spent most of his career in Canada and his work is not quite so well known in the UK. *Rise up my love* is full of beautifully shaped lines, whilst *I beheld her beautiful as a dove* is full of flowing, transparent textures.

The trebles, accompanied by Benjamin Morris on the organ, sing *Nigra sum* by Pablo Casals (1876 - 1973). The melody here is lovely, with some very exotic hints and it gets a lovely focussed flowing line from the trebles. The full chapel choir continues with *Anima mea* by Martin de Rivefrecha (1479-1528). He was a priest at Palencia Cathedral. His motet shows an elegant simplicity, being principally homophonic.

The Four Psalms by Edvard Grieg (1843 - 1907) date from late in Grieg's life, 1906, and are certainly not well enough known. Here the college choir sings *How fair is thy face* with a lovely baritone solo from Michael Mofidian. They sing in English with a rather old fashioned translation from Percy Grainger (rather too many yea's for my liking). There are some perfect hints of the lyric pieces in this lovely piece. The college choir continue with a pair of English works, by Bairstow and Walton. Edward Bairstow (1874 - 1946) was organist at Organ Minster. His anthem *I sat down under his shadow* dates from 1925 and is short but very lovely. William Walton wrote his setting of *Set me as a seal* for the wedding of Ivor Guest and Mabel Fox-Strangeways, in fact Ivor was Walton's mistress's son, who was only a year younger than Walton. It is, perhaps, not quite as Walton-like as some of his works but is a very fine piece. You wonder whether the impassioned devotion that comes over from the words referred to the bride and groom, or to the groom's mother and Walton! The college choir give us some fine solos (from Declan Corr and Katie Matthews).

Accompanied by Robert Dixon (organ), the chapel choir sing *My lovely one* by Walton's contemporary Gerald Finzi (1901 - 1956). It starts with a dark and mysterious organ introduction and then continues in this vein with a poised performance from the choir.

The disc finishes with the combined choirs singing *Blessed be the God and Father* by Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810 - 1876) with Robert Dixon (organ) and Alasdair Austin (treble). This is one of SS Wesley's large scale anthems (written in 1834 for Hereford Cathedral), here it receives a finely polished performance with a lovely treble solo.

This is a fine and enjoyable disc, full of vivid performances and imaginative programming. Under Mark Williams' direction, the choirs make a clear elegant and focussed sound, and clarity is very much the watchword in the performances.

Robert Hugill, Planet Hugill – 'A World of Classical Music'