

Out of Darkness
The Choirs of Jesus College Cambridge
Directed by Mark Williams
Benjamin Morris and Bertie Baigent (organ)
Signum, 2015: SIGCD 409

Recordings by the venerable English collegiate choirs may seem a dime (or 10 eurocents) a dozen, but this 2015 release by the Choir of Jesus College Cambridge under director Mark Williams is notable for both its thematic breadth and its range of repertoire, which spans not only the liturgical period described in the title but also origins from the Renaissance to the present day. It's the latter feature that's most interesting: rarely have the likes of Ned Rorem been seen as fitting into this setting. There's a nice intimate flow to the music, which mostly offers individualistic, sincere responses to the texts and has some exuberant numbers (Britten's Festival Te Deum, Op. 12, track 8, and the final I Saw the Lord of the usually highly buttoned-down John Stainer) to go with the more contemplative pieces. Clearly responses to this will depend on whether listeners like this style of choral singing, but this is an unusually deep example that avoids stereotype and familiar paths. Signum's engineering in the choir's own chapel is exemplary.

James Manheim, AllMusic

This interesting collection samples choral music from the second half of the church year from Ash Wednesday to Trinity and thus gives us a full range of emotions from the reflective period of Lent to the joy of Easter and the excitement of Pentecost. The composers represented take us from the Renaissance with Jean L'Hertier (1480-1551), Thomas Tallis (1505-1585), John Sheppard (1515-1559) and William Byrd (1540-1623) through to the contemporary, represented by Ned Rorem (born 1923), Peter Hurford (1930), Grayston Ives (1948) and James MacMillan (1959). Some pieces are well known: examples include Edward Bairstow's "The Lamentation" or Benjamin Britten's "Festival Te Deum". Others are new to this reviewer, including Rorem's interesting setting of "Breathe On Me, Breath Of God" and MacMillan's spectacular "Sedebit Dominus Rex" from his 'Strathclyde Motets'. Interesting though the content may be the collection stands or falls on the performance and here we have no hesitation in applauding the various choirs of Jesus College Cambridge, namely the College Choir, the Chapel Choir and the Combined Choirs, all under the skilful direction of Mark Williams and accompanied where required by organ scholars Benjamin Morris (who gets a solo with Jean Langlais' "Incantation Pour Un Jour Saint") and Bertie Baigent. The audio quality, courtesy of producer Chris Hazell and engineer Mike Hatch, is outstanding. If you have any interest in choral music this is indispensable.

Stephen Whitehead, CrossRhythms

Spanning Ash Wednesday to Trinity and complementing an earlier release covering Advent to Candlemas, there are works here for Anglican aficionados, all interpreted by Williams with a simplicity that invites continued listening. If the boys' voices in unison sometimes lack total precision, they are always musical. Organ accompaniments are slick and colourful from both players. The choirs featured are chapel (boys and men), college (adult female top line and men) and the two combined, the top line balancing well. Bairstow's The Lamentation is interpreted with marvellous subtlety here. Peter Hurford's evergreen Litany to the Holy Spirit however, is heavy-going on a disc which is otherwise full of delights

Matthew Power, Choir and Organ

Fresh, engaging performances of works spanning the church year, from a choir moving swiftly up the Oxbridge pecking order. The Rorem and MacMillan pieces get especially fine performances.

BBC Music Magazine

The broad span of Church seasons from Lent to Trinity, by way of Passiontide, Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost, is matched here by a catholic choice of repertoire from the 16th century to the 20th.

For the most part, you will need the booklet in front of you as an aid to appreciating the words of these various anthems, but the actual singing by the Choir of Jesus College is malleable enough to accommodate the pensive refinements of William Byrd and the festive *Te Deum* by Benjamin Britten, the brooding "Lamentation" of Edward Bairstow and the lusty "I Saw the Lord" by Stainer.

The programme strays well off the ecclesiastical beaten track to take in a brief, poignant "Breathe on me, Breath of God" by the American composer Ned Rorem, James MacMillan's "Sedebit Dominus Rex" and even an ecstatic "O vos omnes" by Pablo Casals, whose forays into composition have long been overlooked in favour of his reputation as a cellist.

The darkness-to-light format is familiar enough, but the sequence has been carefully thought through here and embraces sufficient variety of styles and texture – some with organ accompaniment, some without – to sustain the disc's 75 minutes. ***

Geoffrey Norris, The Telegraph

Simple, consoling and uplifting, this disc is a therapy session in sound. The combined choirs of Jesus College Cambridge (the chapel choir with trebles and the college choir with women on the top line) have made three excellent recordings for Signum and this a sort of Part Two of *Journey Into Light*, which covered the church year from Advent to Candlemas. *Out of Darkness* leads us from the low point in Lent, to Trinity, when Christians celebrate not just the one God, but his Son and Holy Spirit too.

The music has a logic and beauty independent of its significance to the Church year. Renaissance gems – Byrd's 'Cunctis diebus', Purcell's 'Remember not, Lord', Tallis's crystalline anthem 'If Ye Love Me' – rub shoulders with contemporary commissions such as James MacMillan's Celtic, incantatory Strathclyde Motet, 'Sedebit dominus rex'. There are 17 tracks in all, too many to listen to straight through, but a delight to dip into. My favourites will not necessarily be yours – I can't get Peter Hurford's simple canon 'Litany to the Spirit' out of my head, but that's because my small son learnt it as an audition piece for a chapel choir similar to this one.

The young singers, directed by Mark Williams, have a clear, even tone and unfussy delivery. But even before reading the sleeve notes I felt there was an added emotional ingredient to the performances. Indeed, the much-loved Dean of Chapel, 35-year-old John Hughes, was killed in a car accident just before the recording took place. Rather than postpone, the choirs used the occasion to channel their grief, and *Out of Darkness* is dedicated to the Reverend Dr John Hughes. ****

Amanda Holloway, Sinfini Music

It's worth pointing out that the College has no fewer than three choirs, all of which take part here. There's the Chapel Choir, which comprises boys and men; there's the College Choir, an SATB ensemble, which shares with the Chapel Choir the responsibility of singing for the services in the chapel each week. In addition all the singers come together from time to time as The Combined Choir for concert, recording and touring activities.

The next four pieces are concerned This new album was recorded under emotional and testing conditions. The very day before the sessions were due to begin the musicians received the shocking news that the Dean of the College Chapel, Rev. Dr. John Hughes had died as the result of a car accident; he was only 35 years old. Dr Hughes was evidently a much-loved figure in the College but, bravely, the choir members were emphatic that the recording should go ahead. The disc is dedicated to the memory of Dr Hughes. I mention this not in any way as special pleading – that’s emphatically not needed – but because I don’t think I was being fanciful in detecting an extra degree of intensity in some of the singing here, especially in the Lenten and Passiontide music. I share the admiration of Mark Williams, expressed in the booklet, for the courage and determination shown by his young musicians in determining that ‘the show must go on’.

The programme has been discerningly chosen and the standard of performance is set down at once with an excellent account of Byrd’s *Cunctis diebus*. Here the College Choir achieves a good internal balance, sustains the polyphonic lines intelligently and sings the penitential text with no little feeling. The other Lenten piece, the Purcell, is entrusted to the Combined Choir and comes off well.

Passiontide is represented firstly by Bairstow’s *The Lamentation*. In essence the piece consists of Anglican psalm chants interspersed with a plaintive refrain, which is more or less how the composer himself described it rather self-deprecatingly. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts and despite the self-imposed “constraint” of writing in Anglican chant Bairstow produced an eloquent piece with a refrain that is most affecting. Affecting too is this fine Jesus College performance which is distinguished, for one thing, by excellent attention to dynamics. Also for Passiontide is a piece that was completely new to me by a composer who I’ve not encountered before. The Belgian, Fernand Laloux (1901-1970) came to Britain in 1914, presumably as a war refugee. He never returned to his homeland and instead carved out a career as an organist and music teacher in his adopted country. Rather remarkably, he continued to play the organ even after he lost a leg while on active service in World War II. His *Tantum ergo* for SATB choir is gentle, fluent and chaste in tone with a definite French accent discernible in the harmonies. It’s an unassuming piece but quite disarming and I’m delighted to have discovered it.

The programme’s celebration of Easter commences with Stanford’s *Ye Choirs of New Jerusalem*. What a splendid piece this is. My only slight reservation about this excellent performance is to wonder if Mark Williams takes it just a tiny fraction too quickly; the quavers sound a little bit pressed. I gather from the notes that we have the late David Trendall to thank for the rediscovery and publication of *Surrexit pastor bonus* by the French composer, Jean L’Héritier (1480-1551). We should be grateful to Trendall because this six-part piece is far too good to lose. The Jesus College performance is a nice light and airy one.

I take very mild issue with the decision to treat the pieces by Langlais and MacMillan as Ascension pieces. The MacMillan is one of his *Strathclyde Motets* and it’s a setting of the Communion Prayer said at Mass in the Roman Rite on the Feast of Christ the King. That feast is celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church on the last Sunday in the liturgical year – in other words on the Sunday immediately preceding Advent. So this has nothing to do with the Feast of the Ascension though I grant that the words are not inappropriate. Similarly, I don’t think Langlais wrote his stunning organ solo with the Ascension in mind. The plainchant melodies on which he based it are firstly the invocation ‘*Lumen Christi*’, which is associated with the Easter Vigil service and secondly a chant which, if memory serves, is used for the Litany of the Saints. That quibble is rather trumped, however, by the superb way in which Benjamin Morris, the Senior Organ Scholar, delivers this arresting piece.

It's good that Peter Hurford's Litany to the Holy Spirit has been included for this distinguished organist was an undergraduate of Jesus College in the late 1940s and is now an Honorary Fellow. The trebles of the Chapel Choir sing his Litany very nicely. I'm glad also to find a piece by Ned Rorem included. He's a very fine composer whose music doesn't get the exposure it deserves. He has written some noteworthy choral music and his subtle, refined Breathe on me, breath of God is an excellent example. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me is the opening section of Elgar's oratorio, The Apostles. It works very well as a separate anthem and when the accompaniment is as imaginatively voiced on the organ as is here the case one doesn't miss the orchestra as much as might be thought. Benjamin Morris establishes a wonderfully mysterious atmosphere at the start and the Combined Choir sings very well indeed.

Finally, Trinity is represented by the final two items on the programme. The Sheppard anthem is expertly paced by Mark Williams and he gets refined singing from the College Choir. As a matter of personal taste I wish something a bit more interesting than Stainer's I Saw the Lord had been chosen for the last item, well though it's performed. The opening section is quite vivid but then in the second section - 'O Trinity! O Unity!' - Stainer lapses into Victorian convention and the piece rather runs out of steam.

This is a fine recital, which has been planned discerningly and performed with great skill and commitment. The recording, produced by Chris Hazell and engineered by Mike Hatch, is very good, not least in balancing the singers against the organ in a very satisfactory way. Philip Borg-Wheeler's notes are interesting and informative. Despite - or, perhaps, because of - the difficult circumstances under which it was made the musicians of Jesus College have produced a fine CD which is a fitting memorial to their Chapel Dean.

John Quinn, Musicweb International
