

## CD Reviews:

Howard Skempton *The Cloths of Heaven*

The Exon Singers ; Matthew Owens ; Jeffrey Makinson

Delphian Records DCD 34056



Gramophone  
December 2008

### Critics' Choice of the year

**S**erene simplicity from Skempton, the master of miniatures, in a **wonderfully nuanced performance from the Exon Singers and Matthew Owens.**

Flickering candles, dark shadows and ante-chapel ambiances come to life here, making it the ideal stocking filler.

*Pwyll ap Siôn*

*Skilled and caring treatment graces this survey of Skempton's choral works.*

**H**ighlights from among the songs include the formal yet fervent treatment of Burns in *O Life!*, methodical settings from Donne's versification of Lamentations, and the harmonic melodic interplay of the Emerson Songs. Two organ pieces round out the programme, with the artless *Recessional* being an apt conclusion. Music such as this is easy to kill with overstatement or dull with caution, neither of which is true of these performers: notably the mellifluous Bartholomew Lawrence in the Lamentations, and **the Exon Singers, whose responsiveness is a tribute to Matthew Owens,** whether as director or organist. The sound provides an ideal ambience and presentation is on a par with earlier Delphian issues, making for a release in which Skempton admirers and newcomers alike will find much to savour.

*Richard Whitehouse*

BBC Music Magazine  
October 2008

Performance \*\*\*

Recording \*\*\*\*

**M**ystical, mesmeric and miniaturist; Howard Skempton's music nods to several portraits in the gallery of choral composers without obliterating its own personality. He may well end up placed on the wall next to Arvo Pärt, whose simplicity and use of chordal textures is somewhat comparable. **The Exon Singers, under their director Matthew Owens, excel where qualities of clarity and purity are concerned;** there's no disputing their precision and blend. *Beati quorum via*, for instance, is filled with staunch unanimity of purpose and faultless tuning – Owens plays the choir like a piano.

If there is a danger it's that Skempton's eddies and repetitions inspire a slightly directionless performance style. Whether or not this is part of Skempton's philosophy is unclear, but the fine line between mesmeric and perfunctory is sometimes crossed. The solo songs trouble me in this respect, and fail to really add anything to the programming of the disc; there are vocal colours and textures, particularly at the softer end of the spectrum, which remain uninvestigated here.

**The Exons are at their most exciting in exalted mode – the Sanctus from the Missa brevis is thrilling. Ave virgo sanctissima, too, is wonderful.** The recording quality is excellent, balancing bloom and clarity in exemplary fashion.

*William Whitehead*

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## Classic FM Magazine

November 2008

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**H**oward Skempton's output combines traditional compositional craft with rare wit, invention and experiment. His exquisite choral music, conceived largely in miniature form, draws inspiration from, among other sources, the sounds and colours of medieval polyphony, plainsong and folk music. For all these venerable influences and the prevailing simplicity of the pieces, he manages to elude predictability by a mile. Listen, for example, to his unrelenting yet strangely comforting setting of Burns's "O Life!". **Thumbs up to Matthew Owens and his Exon Singers for serving Skempton's artistic cause with such honest conviction and love.**

*Andrew Stewart*

## The Scotsman

5th September 2008

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**A**lthough an avowedly experimental composer, Howard Skempton's compositions have often revealed an easy-on-the-ear focus on consonant sound and melody rather than the knottier qualities usually associated with anything tagged as "experimental" music. That is certainly true of his vocal music on this **beautifully recorded and performed disc**, featuring the Exon Singers under conductor Matthew Owens, who commissioned much of the music, some while Master of Music at St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh.

Most have origins in the Christian religious tradition, with only a setting of Burns' O Life! for baritone and organ and four pantheistic Emerson Songs drawing on secular sources. They are also characteristically short (only the Lamentations exceeds ten minutes, and several are under two minutes long), and employ a simplicity of means and lack of conventional development that will strike listeners as **ethereally beautiful** or maddeningly static, according to taste.

*Kenny Mathieson*

## Cathedral Music

January 2009

**M**atthew Owens is foremost in championing the music of contemporary church musicians and this CD presents a retrospective programme of the music of Howard Skempton, written over the last twenty-five years. The composer is fortunate in having the excellent Exon Singers and soloists to perform a variety of pieces from motets and anthems to canticles and solo songs under the expert guidance of Matthew Owens who himself instigated the composition of several of the items on the disc. These include *Beati quorum via*, *Ave Virgo sanctissima*, *Adam lay ybounden*, *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis* for trebles and *Missa Brevis* written especially for this CD.

*Alan Spedding*

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#### Choir & Organ

November / December 2008

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It would have been nice to have had the dates of composition provided in this overview of 25 years of Howard Skempton's output. The overall impression is that his reputation as an accomplished composer of small-scale works is easily applied to this collection of choral music, whose highlights are the vignettes *Adam lay y-bounden* and *Ave Virgo sanctissima*. The opening track *Upon my lap my sovereign sits*, an unaccompanied solo piece sung by Beth Mackay, serves as a reminder that **the Exon Singers under Matthew Owens have a well-deserved name as one of the best chamber choirs in the country. The standard of singing, tuning, ensemble and choral colour throughout the disc bear this out.**

Caroline Gill

#### Yorkshire Post

8th August 2008

If less is more, Howard Skempton deserves to be more widely known. His elegance of line and economy of means creates a sound world whose individuality and **expressive beauty is revealed to memorable effect by the Exon Singers** under conductor Matthew Owens. Calm miniatures like *O Saviour of the World* contrast with the larger scale *Lamentations*. Some of the music has the cast of plainsong; **all of it is carefully calculated and beautifully written, not least the ravishing *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*. A lovely recording.**

#### Musicweb

June 2009

The English composer, Howard Skempton, studied with Cornelius Cardew and, as it says in the booklet notes, "Cardew helped him to discover a musical language of great simplicity." That simplicity – or economy of means – is well displayed in the pieces on this CD.

The conductor Matthew Owens is obviously an enthusiast for Howard Skempton's music and several of the pieces on this disc were written at his prompting. These include the *Missa Brevis*, a terse, economical work, the aforementioned *Edinburgh Service* and the Advent carol, *Adam lay y-bounden*, which is a succinct, effective and attractive piece. Some of the choral music, whilst not eschewing simplicity of utterance, offers a warm harmonic language. Particularly notable in this regard is *He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*, a setting in C major of Yeats's well known text, which gradually expands into eight parts. This is probably the most sensuous piece in the programme. Another example of Skempton's willingness to employ warm harmonies and quite rich textures is *Beati quorum via*. More subdued is *Ave Virgo sanctissima*, a pretty intense, devotional piece. On the surface at least the music in this latter piece is economical of means but that doesn't mean it's not a highly effective setting ... there's much to enjoy on this disc ... **the Exon Singers are uniformly excellent.** The recorded sound is first rate and, all in all, this is a disc that serves Howard Skempton's music very well indeed.

John Quinn