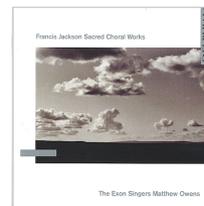


CD Reviews:

Francis Jackson *Sacred Choral Music*

The Exon Singers ; Matthew Owens ; David Bednall

Delphian Records DCD 34035 2006



International Record Review

February 2007

Francis Jackson, the distinguished elder statesman of English organist-composers, has enjoyed an association with The Exon Singers in recent years that has borne fruit in the shape of two commissions, both included in this anthology. But it's obvious, even without the justification of these two works, that **the Exons sing as to the manner born**; there's a real enjoyment of Jackson's varied but often lush textures here, as well as a keen attention to the rhythmic flow of the melodic lines.

Jackson has written a considerable amount of music in Latin as well as in English, three examples of which open this disc. The section of the *Missa Matris Dei* that most impresses me is the powerful 'Sanctus', which springs from a surging single line, performed with passionate conviction by the Exons, and which builds up into an ecstatic vision of heavenly glory (watch out for that exultant leap in the final chord of the 'Benedictus'!), though the 'Agnus Dei', with its soaring soprano solo, is also captivating. A similar lush ecstasy characterizes *O Salutaris Hostia* and *Tantum Ergo*. In English-texted works such as *A Hymn to God the Father* (one of the Exon commissions), I feel that there is a, so to speak, drier, more objective relationship between words and music, and that this gives them an entirely different strength from that to be found in the pieces that use Latin. Not that the English pieces lack that quality of ecstasy, as one may easily hear in the high-flying lines of the 'Magnificat' or the subtle building-up of power in the 'Nunc Dimittis' that comprise the *Evening Service* in B flat (the other Exon commission); it is simply different in kind.

The *Prayer of St Francis* is entirely distinct in

that it sets the original Italian text, and I have to say that I find it the most meandering, least focused work on the disc. No matter; the rest is **a real treasure. It's also worth pointing out that none of the works on the disc has been previously recorded.**

Ivan Moody

Gramophone

December 2006

A touching and rewarding set of English church music

Francis Jackson is very much the elder statesman of the British organ community. He has remained active as an organist and composer ever since his retirement in 1982 as Organist at York Minster (a post he held for 36 years), and while his organ pieces are well represented on disc, his choral music is less well known. Yet his output for choir is both extensive and wide-ranging, as this superb new disc reveals.

The opening work, composed in 1988, is one of no fewer than 10 Mass settings Jackson has composed. This has a distinctly Howellsian feel to it, not least in the gentle and atmospheric *Kyrie*, the flowing lines gracefully traced by the Exon Singers at their most relaxed and assured. The triumphant *Gloria* (described as packing a 'Gallic Punch' in the booklet-notes) is marked by some virtuoso organ playing from David Bednall.

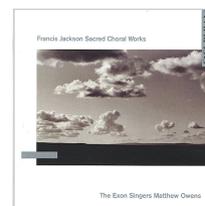
The other major work here is the *Evening Service* in B flat, its homage to Weelkes revealed in its use of five-part choral textures; neither the lavish organ accompaniment nor Jackson's opulent harmonies recalling Weelkes in any way. This is a noble setting sung here with magnificent expansiveness by the group for whom it was written in 2005. *A Hymn to God the*

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Father, commissioned by the Exon Singers and setting words by John Donne, is also in five parts and accompanied. But Jackson's music here recalls more than anything else the character of early 20th-century English choral music; the name of Arnold Bax is evoked in this instance. One cannot discern in this programme a particularly distinctive or original compositional voice, but given Matthew Owens's affectionate readings and the Exon Singers' **beautifully tailored singing**, not to mention a richly atmospheric recording from Wells Cathedral, this presents as touching and rewarding a compendium of very English 20th-century church music as one could wish for.

Marc Rochester

Classic FM Magazine

January 2007

★★★★

Still going strong at 89, Jackson represents a rich tradition of Anglican music. His eloquent *Missa Matris Dei* is **brilliantly sung**.

Organists' Review

February 2007

Francis Jackson celebrates his 90th birthday this year and, in honour of this, Delphian have released this CD of works not previously recorded which, excepting *O Most Merciful* and *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, span the past two decades.

Dr Jackson's compositional gifts are well

known to us, particularly in his organ music, and many of us will have sung Jackson in G (Communion Service) and perhaps his Evening Canticle settings, but just as many of us, I suspect, may have little or no idea of the magnitude of his output, never mind its quality, structure and emotional content. Well, you need to fasten your seatbelts. **The effect of *Missa Matris Dei* is utterly overwhelming.** The vocal writing is uncompromising, with an outpouring of soul so intense that sometimes it becomes almost unbearable. **Witness the *Sanctus's* 'Hosanna', and if you think that's breath-taking, then wait for the *Benedictus's* 'Hosanna'!** This work sets the stage for the whole CD - not that it's all at this hard-driven pitch - which displays a profound spiritual response to the many and varied texts. A number of 20th century influences can be heard, French and English, but they are all absorbed into Dr Jackson's own language which translates as well into large polyphonic texture as into strophic and extended homophonic writing.

The music makes great demands on the singers, who meet the challenge fearlessly and with great panache and sensitivity. David Bednall provides superb organ accompaniment and Matthew Owens, no stranger to contemporary music, is clearly in his element.

This CD is a major achievement on the part of composer and performers and they are to be congratulated and thanked for making this important music accessible to us all. You need to buy this CD!

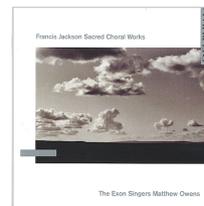
Andrew Fletcher

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thislocallondon.com

February 2007

Since his retirement as organist and master of choristers at York Minster in 1982, Jackson has hardly had his feet up. Here is the proof, a disc almost entirely made up of works written over the past 20 years, confirming him as doyen of our church composers.

Matthew Owens, director of music at Wells Cathedral, and his Exon Singers are well inside the music on these 16 tracks. The *Missa Matris Dei* (1988) demonstrates Jackson's continuing vigour, with an unashamedly exciting Gloria and leaping hosannas, before a timelessly calm Agnus Dei. So, too does his Evening Service in homage to Weelkes. His Three Carols for Advent, the first a forthright hymn, generate a mood of expectancy, while Thanks Be To The Lord, written for the 2002 Commonwealth Games, has wonderful, fanfare-style Alleluias.

What a way to celebrate one's 90th year!

Martin Dreyer

Cross Rhythms Direct

11th November 2006

Francis Jackson is elder statesman of English cathedral organists. He was born in Yorkshire in 1917, was a chorister at York Minster from 1929 to 1933 and later a pupil of and assistant to the Minster organist, the great Sir Edward Bairsow. In 1946 Jackson succeeded Bairsow as organist and master of the choristers at York and remained in post until his retirement in 1982. Jackson's retirement has been

an active one, as this disc shows. Two of the pieces were written for the Exon Singers' annual Festival. There is a motet from 2004 entitled "A Hymn To God The Father" using a poem by John Donne and from the next year an "Evening Service In B Flat." The Exon Singers obviously know and love the work of Francis Jackson and on this disc they do him proud. The recording was made in Wells Cathedral and is produced by Paul Baxter who has given us a near-perfect soundscape, allowing the beauty of the music full flight in the excellent acoustic of the building. All 11 works on this disc are first recordings and are full of colour, emotional depth and attention to structural detail. The composer was present at the recording and must be delighted with the end result.

Steven Whitehead

Church Music Quarterly

Spring 2007

According to their biography, The Exon Singers are 'recognised as one of the UK's leading chamber choirs'. I agree. There is a lot about this disc which reveals their strengths: strong singing (notably the radiant tenors) and a generous, rich sound, especially in the unaccompanied works. The music is all gloriously Jackson, ranging from a fine setting of the Mass (*Missa Matris Dei*) to the blazing *Thanks be to the Lord* which is given a thrilling performance. **The Exon Singers have yet again produced a useful disc full of first recordings which will go a long way to bringing more of Jackson's excellent and neglected works into the public domain. For this especially, they should be commended.**

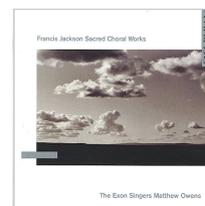
Will Dawes

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Choir and Organ

February 2008

Jackson was 90 last year, and nearly all of the works on this disc were written after his retirement from York Minster in 1982. Unsurprisingly, there are shades of the English, as well as the French, traditions to be found in these vibrant settings, which include two very recent commissions from the Exon Singers, **the luminously beautiful A Hymn to God the Father and the colourful Evening Service in B flat. These, along with the other works on the disc, confirm that Jackson's creative powers have not dimmed and we are indebted to the Exon Singers for preserving them in such fine performances.**

Alan Bullard