

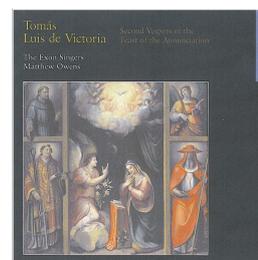
CD Reviews:

Tomás Luis de Victoria

Second Vespers of the Feast of the Annunciation

The Exon Singers ; Matthew Owens

Delphian Records DCD34025 2004



International Record Review

November 2004

Tomás Luis de Victoria is best known today for the dark, contemplative beauty of his Requiem and *Tenebrae Responsories*, but his contemporaries regarded him as an essentially joyful composer. It's this dimension which is to the fore in this new recording from Matthew Owens and The Exon Singers, who have gathered together some of Victoria's most exhilarating antiphonal works to form a hypothetical Second Vespers of the Feast of the Annunciation. All the practical liturgical niceties have been observed, with plainchant antiphons fore and aft of the main polyphonic items, plus the added indulgence of a joyous *Regina coeli* and Victoria's only surviving litany which sets a text full of invocations to the Virgin Mary – the devotional focus of the service as a whole.

Recent research into the contemporary performance of Victoria's church music suggests that far from being performed by voices alone it was often doubled by instruments for added colour and sonority, and the composer certainly specified organ participation in polychoral works. But Owens prefers the naked choral truth, and when you hear the range of tone colours and textural variety produced by these singers, you know that instruments here would be superfluous. If there's one phrase which really sums up the approach of The Exon Singers then it's 'full-throated'; even the plainsong is delivered at full throttle – loud and consequential. This is certainly not a sly way of implying heavy-handedness. These performances may not be ethereal or very El Greco, but they lack nothing in terms of chiaroscuro, clarity of part-writing, rhythmic bite or razor-sharp polychoral interplay. Only in the deeply, deeply moving eight-voice *Ave Maria* does the tempo seem a notch

too steep, and perhaps there are a handful of chunky choral entries ('Fecit potentiam' and 'Gloria Patri' in the Magnificat) which are a little on the boisterous side.

Otherwise **one is just swept along by the unabashed exuberance of the singing and the sheer glee with which these musicians fill the expectant acoustic with glorious ringing chords and surging, boldly drawn counterpoint.** A more cautious, less imaginative conductor than Owens would have reigned in his tenors at final cadences, but here they are granted full licence to exploit Victoria's delicious cadential elaborations. **The close of *Nisi dominus* and *Regina coeli* have never sounded so thrilling, even more so thanks to the bold recorded sound which brings with it more tenor and bass colour than we often get to hear. Owens – newly appointed Master of Music at Wells Cathedral – is a prodigiously gifted choir trainer and elicits maximum commitment from his singers. I confidently predict great things for the future. Remember, you read it here first. Victoria with verve – vigorously recommended.**

Simon Heighes

BBC Music Magazine

December 2004

*** Performance

**** Sound

Victoria's Marian music here receives two very different interpretations. The first is an assemblage by scholar Jon Dixon of Marian music in the form of a synthetic Vesper service, while the second presents the core movements of

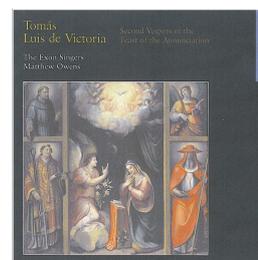
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an actual Victoria Mass – and contextualises them by exploring some of the Marian masterpieces used in the first disc. In short, Owens’s ‘Vespers’ programme reinvents while Baker’s gives a ‘straight’ representation, a divide that characterises the qualities of each interpretation as well.

Daring tempi and breathtaking contrasts are two primary means by which Matthew Owens brings to life Victoria’s intensely personal response to the Marian texts. Behind the grandeur of the composer’s triple-

choir polyphony lurks an internal dialogue voiced in reduced, *alternatim*-style sections. **The Exon Singers move fluidly between these two poles,** aided by an acoustic that blends whispered petitions as precisely as triumphant proclamations. Although the acoustic might blur Victoria’s trademark voice-crossing or his play with such forbidden intervals as tritons, the gain in dramatic impact amply justified the trade-off.

By contrast the Westminster Cathedral Choir imposes upon Victoria’s music a reading in which rich counterpoint and overwhelming chordal sonorities overwhelm any intimacy. The cathedral’s spaciousness and the organ’s resonance force the vocalists to emphasise either the words or rhythm of even the most delicate line; consequently, a reflective Victoria cannot emerge. The choir’s celebrated strengths – distinct vocal lines, pristine diction, razor-sharp intonation – give full play to Victoria’s sumptuous polyphony, but also inhibit the emergence of any personal narrative such as that that the Exon Singers achieve through more nuanced gestures.

Should Victoria’s genius serve to inspire a world-renowned cathedral choir, or should native choral tradition be adapted to explore the

composer’s dramatic potential? While Westminster Cathedral’s approach thrills aurally, **the Exon Singers compel emotionally.** The choice is yours.

Berta Joncus

The Daily Telegraph October 2004

This is one of those rare liturgical reconstructions that create the illusion that the listener is actually in the congregation. The tenors and basses project the considerable amount of plainsong with confidence and an air of utter familiarity, as if they do this sort of thing every day.

So it is easy to imagine oneself transported to a Spanish monastery church on a late 16th-century March afternoon. The same confidence, enhanced by a **brilliant soprano sound**, is magnificently displayed in the mainly polychoral settings of the psalms, antiphons, hymn and Magnificat, which show Victoria’s complete mastery of the art of writing for two or more choirs.

These glorious pieces abound in grand and sonorous climaxes, quickfire antiphonal exchanges, and light-footed triple-time passages, and their being separated by passages of plainsong increases the impact still further. Only if Easter were exceptionally early, however, would the Regina Caeli’s jubilantly cascading alleluias be heard on the feast of the Annunciation; the correct Marian antiphon would normally be the alleluia-less Lenten Ave Regina.

Elizabeth Roche

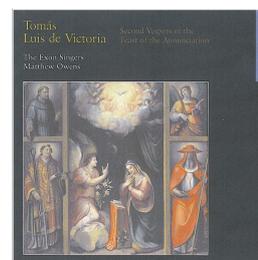
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Early Music America Summer 2005

Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611) wrote a great deal of music for Marian use, but there's no evidence that he left any through-composed music for the Marian Vespers (à la Monteverdi in his 1610 Vespers). What we have on this recording by the Exon Singers is a collection of Marian works arranged in a liturgical context suitable for the Feast of the Annunciation. This is Victoria at his best, and that means it's as brilliant as anything that came out of the Renaissance. These are multi-choir settings whose foreshadowing of the early Baroque is inescapable. For example, there's a glorious antiphonal setting of the *Laudate pueri Dominum* where high voices engage in a celestial joust with the SATB choir. Victoria pulls out all the stops in this music, with supernovas of polychoral splendor and marvelously varied writing—his shifts in texture and rhythm are breathtaking.

The Exon Singers, a mixed voice ensemble, are not as well-known as some of the high-profile British ensembles but they easily surpass many of them. They sing with a **wonderfully full-blooded, youthful, vigor** when both SATB choirs get going, yet they are also **knock-out gorgeous** in the reduced voice sections. The thrilling alterations from duple to triple time are seamless—a tribute to the **excellent leadership of the ensemble's conductor, Matthew Owens.** This is an **exciting and beautifully produced recording** that presents a side of Victoria that may surprise many ears.

Craig Zeichner

The Scotsman 20 August 2004

Matthew Owens, master of music at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh, is also director of the long-established Exon Singers. It is with the latter that he explores a setting of the Liturgical Vespers – for the Feast of the Annunciation – by the sixteenth century Spanish born Tomás Luis de Victoria in this beautifully-produced release from Delphian. **There is an air of perfection about the singing, but the total blend is exquisite without being sterile.** The music ranges from plainsong and antiphons to full-blown motets.

Kenneth Walton

Early Music Forum of Scotland News September 2004

This beautiful liturgical reconstruction employs Victoria's settings in from four to twelve voices of texts appropriate this important service, and **the Exon Singers acquit themselves exceptionally well in this challenging music.** They move with ease from plainchant to polyphony, and the latter is performed with great clarity and energy. Particularly beautiful are the sections for solo voices which are simply radiant, while the polychoral items have great power and impact. As editor and publisher of the polyphony and an expert on the music of Victoria, Jon Dixon has written an intriguing and informative programme note to accompany the release, and clearly explains the thinking behind this rich sequence of service music.