

Non-traditional Holiday Music: New Choral Returns to Favor

Even those of us addicted to new and avant-garde music put it aside at Christmas time and snuggle back into the warm, cuddly past. Out go the Anthony Braxton and Philip Glass, in come Handel's *Messiah* and Bach's cantatas. After all, what's Christmas—or any other solemn, spiritual holiday—without choral music? And who writes choral music these days? Practically nobody of any importance.

And thank goodness, you say, for late-20th-century styles have been less grateful to the voice than in any other period of history. Twelve-tone and experimental choral music, with its huge leaps and angular melodies, its weird mouth sounds and shocking vocal noises—you can't really celebrate or meditate with that. Choral music and the art of serious composition got divorced after World War II, for patent reasons of incompatibility.

Well, the above isn't true any more. Choral music is making a comeback. Like it or hate it, but we've got minimalism to thank. Tonality returned in the '60s, and minimalism brought back the stable melodic and contrapuntal textures without which choral music just doesn't sound very good. Philip Glass wrote the avant-garde's first voice-friendly choral work back in the late '70s, *Another Look at Harmony* (unfortunately, still not commercially available). William Duckworth followed soon after with *Southern Harmony* (recorded on Lovely Music, ★★★★★), a hypnotic choral cycle sung by the estimable Gregg Smith singers and based on old-time Southern shaped-note hymns. It wasn't until this season, though, that choral music exploded to the point that it feels like a living genre again. Suddenly we've got enough new recordings that we can start to make comparisons in recent choral styles.

The most visible contender for new modern choral disc of the year is Arvo Pärt's *Canon Pokajanen* (ECM, ★★★), which is based on an 8th-century chant called the Canon of Repentance. Tonal if austere, and full of memorable sonic images, Pärt has cornered the market on musical spirituality. He's such a Johnny-come-lately minimalist, though, that I have to attribute at least a little of his immense popularity to a snobbish classical preference for Europeans. But if you get much holiday cheer from *Canon Pokajanen*, then you've got a pretty severe idea of Christmas. Pärt hews closely to the chant, adding chords—sometimes vibrant and even dissonant ones—but no instruments and not a shred of counterpoint. The minimalist figures that imparted a familiar touch to Pärt's popular *Fratres* and *Passion* are absent, banished for a devotionality so austere as to frighten away, I suspect, those who want musical spirituality in easy-listening doses. Though ambitiously published with liner notes in German, English, French, Italian and Russian, *Canon Pokajanen* seems unlikely to become a hit except with die-hard Pärt fans—although the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, to whom the work is dedicated, are splendidly captured on the recording.

Call the Americans less devout if you want, but they write friendlier music. Mary Jane Leach in particular, whose music for (mostly women's) chorus first appeared on an XI disc called *Celestial Fires*



I Cantori

(★★★), and now continues on *Ariadne's Lament* (both New World, ★★★★★). Two choral works expertly sung by the New York Treble Singers are from a mammoth series Leach is putting out based on a feminist rereading of the Ariadne myth, in which the abandoned sprite no longer lays her down and dies. Leach's counterpoint approaches Renaissance motets in its conventionalism, except that she draws out the occasional dissonances to great length, thrilling the ear with the buzz of long-sustained half-steps.

West Coaster Daniel Lentz has a history of choral involvement as long as Pärt's; his *Missa Umbrarum* of 1973 (New Albion, ★★★★★), accompanied by rubbing the rims of wine glasses with wetted fingers, is certainly the only avant-garde mass setting mellow enough for liturgical use. Now he's come out with a 50-minute choral magnum opus, *Apologetica* (New Albion, ★★★★★). Brief, well-chosen texts by himself and others commemorate the tragic slaughter of indigenous American peoples by the Spanish, and the unusual orchestration of strings and MIDI keyboards seem to always surround the singers of I Cantori with a halo. No need to fear dissonance or austerity here; if anything, intellectual musicians may be put off by Lentz's too-pretty, but the music is solidly structured nonetheless.

It may not be the most Christmas-y choral fare; you have to be in a mood to repent or apologize. But an age of warm, listenable, singable choral music has definitely returned, and Lentz's *Apologetica* in particular can provide a non-sectarian holiday atmosphere. —Kyle Gann

DANA HURSEY