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NICCOLÒ JOMMELLI (1714–1774)

REQUIEM & MISERERE

MISSA PRO DEFUNCTIS IN E FLAT MAJOR (HOCJ A1.3) FOR FOUR VOICES, STRINGS AND BASSO CONTINUO

Il Gardellino Vocal Ensemble & Baroque Orchestra / Peter Van Heyghen

Passacaille PAS 1076, 2020; one disc, 64 minutes

Niccolò Jommelli composed the *Missa pro defunctis* for the funeral service of Princess Maria Augusta of Thurn und Taxis, mother of Duke Charles Eugene of Württemberg, in 1756, during his appointment as maestro di cappella at the court. The circumstances surrounding the work and the identities of the composer and performers (eight singers and ten instrumentalists from the Hof- und Kammermusik) have been well investigated and documented in detail by musicologists such as Manfred Hermann Schmid ('Das Requiem von Niccolò Jommelli im Württembergischen Hofzeremoniell 1756', *Musik in Baden-Württemberg* 4 (1997), 11–30).

This CD contains the *Missa* and the subsequent Responsorium *Libera me*, which often does not appear in later copies of the *Missa*, as noted by Wolfgang Hochstein (*Die Kirchenmusik von Niccolò Jommelli (1714–1774) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der liturgisch gebundenen Kompositionen*, two volumes (Hildesheim: Olms, 1984)). The disc does not include the monophonic 'Te decet hymnus' in the *Missa*, which is missing in the main source of the work, a copy dated 1775 by Giuseppe Sigismondo, now held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (L 4653). The *hymnus* is preserved, however, in a later source held in the music collection of Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Carl von Ossietzky, Hamburg (M.A./151), and there is reasonable evidence to presume that similar monophonic performances took place in Dresden at that time. The *Missa* was performed frequently in Germany and in Italy from the late 1760s and early 1770s, sometimes with new instrumentation or the addition of extra parts. Antonio Salieri, for example, added oboes, bassoons and trombones when conducting the work at the funeral service of Gluck in Vienna in 1787. A revised version featuring two orchestras was performed in Rome in 1823 during services for the death of Antonio Canova. The piece's widespread popularity is attested to by the high number of extant manuscripts (c130) and nineteenth-century printed editions in libraries throughout Europe.

It is probable that the composer had very little time to complete the work: the note 'scritto in 3 giorni' (written in three days) is added by a later hand on the Neapolitan manuscript. He incorporated revisions of his earlier compositions, in particular fugal themes from his Italian sacred works, all unknown in Stuttgart: new counterpoint that met his standards would probably have required much commitment, craft and, perhaps, time and experimentation. These revisions appear especially in fugues or fugal movements at the ends of sections, sometimes as a da capo or a varied reprise (*Kyrie eleison*, 'Quam olim Abrahae', 'Hosanna'). Repetition of material is found in the *Sequentia*, where for example the music of the 'Dies irae' returns on 'Judex ergo', and 'Salva me' is the same as 'Voca me'; these latter repetitions are based on corresponding meanings in the text, and are used to create greater coherence. Furthermore, the coda of 'Pie Jesu', 'dona eis requiem', at the end of the *Sequentia* is very similar to the coda of the second *Kyrie*: both consist of stately chordal acclamations alternating with staccato imitative figures in the two violins. There was also an eighteenth-century performance tradition in which the initial movement was repeated in the *Communio* in an identical or varied form, still in relation to a common textual basis ('Requiem aeternam'), but here with a slightly different tempo marking: Larghetto instead of Adagio. The *Communio* follows the *Agnus Dei* with an *attacca* transition.

Jommelli set the words 'requiem aeternam dona eis Domine' in consoling fashion, with throbbing syncopated rhythms in the violins and with homophonic vocal writing in the mid or low range, leading to a brief solo passage for alto and soprano in imitation and in a higher range on 'et lux perpetua'. There is in this music more of consolation and repose than of judgment and possible damnation. After a *Kyrie* in *stile antico*, the *Christe eleison* begins with 'Christe' over a descending tetrachord in long notes (minims and crotchets) in the solo alto and tenor together with divided viola parts, while 'eleison' follows in short values (quavers) after a



single instrumental bar. This division of the violas and the independent voicing of the violins (for example in the 'Dies irae' and 'Oro supplex' of the *Sequentia*) are just some of the remarkable instrumentation choices; others include the changes in the accompaniment at every tercet of the *Sequentia* to produce a through-composed structure that expresses the deepest meanings of the text. The combination of extended and shortened musical figures producing rhythmic variety and contrast is characteristic of 'ingemisco tamquam reus' in the 'Salva me', where 'ingemisco' is set to a descending diminished seventh, a recurring motto in minor-mode melodies in the eighteenth century, here suggestive of the fall and repentance of the sinner.

Other motives highlight single words or concepts to emphasize the figures of speech employed in the poetry: in the *Sequentia* the faster semiquaver and demisemiquaver accompaniments on 'favilla', and the fanfare-like rhythms and ideas on 'tuba'; in the *Offertorium*, the descending intervals and low vocal range on 'de profundo lacu' and the descending broken chord on 'ne cadant in obscurum'. The instrumental accompaniment and a deceptive cadence successfully convey a sense of expectation on 'illa die', with the implicit meaning of 'judgment day'. The fanfare-like rhythms and the key of E flat major might suggest that the orchestra could include trumpets (not notated in the score). The alternation between tutti and solo is exploited at the beginning of the *Sequentia*, the *Sanctus* and the *Agnus Dei*, which all start vigorously with a brief choral acclamation before changing to a succession of solo passages, in dialogue with the chorus.

As for the musical interpretation itself, Peter Van Heyghen and Il Gardellino follow the original version of the work attentively, using eight vocal soloists together with a medium-sized string ensemble. The fugues and other contrapuntal sections are played with extreme precision and structural clarity, and the choral acclamations and dotted rhythms convey appropriate force, as in the performance of the fanfare-like rhythms of 'Tuba mirum spargens sonum'. Here the dynamic contrasts of *forte* and *piano* are realized effectively and add especially to the low contrasting register of 'per sepulchra'.

The ensemble's highlighting of the contrasting musical figures that abound in the score creates either a bright and lively texture or a grey one that expresses mourning and, especially, acceptance, with variety and nuance. For example, in the 'Confutatis', which is set as a homophonic chorus with an ostinato staccato accompaniment of bass and violas in alternation with the violins (probably meant to convey the notion of the hellish flames), the choir accents the emphatic chords of the line beginning 'Confutatis' before the soloists render the 'voca mea' tenderly. In the *Sanctus* the marking *crescendo il forte*, typically used in Jommelli's music to denote a crescendo, is highlighted intensely. In contrast, the *Benedictus* is a solo number for soprano, in an AA' form; the performance brings to the fore the dialogues between the violins and continuo, together with a delicate rendering of the soprano part, including the vocal flourishes and the final improvised cadence.

The detailed liner notes, written by conductor Van Heyghen, offer some biographical information about the composer and an interesting introduction to the *Missa* and *Miserere*, discussing issues of performance context, musical structure, and the sources and their tradition. The recording may thus be regarded as a contribution not only to Jommelli research and discography but also to the study and practice of sacred music in the mid-eighteenth century, in the Italian and the northern traditions. It is a welcome addition and worthy of attention.

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