

## Lamentatio Jeremiae Prophetae, KTC 1343 (2008)

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The Lamentations of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah were written in response to the fall of Jerusalem and Judah in 586 BCE. The texts, which in fact may not even be by Jeremiah at all, consist of five chapters. The first, second and fourth of these are identical in structure: they contain the same number of verses (22) as letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The translation in the Vulgate Bible (which is the source for Renaissance composers) has each Latin verse beginning with the corresponding letter of the alphabet ... aleph, beth, ghimel etc.

The texts have a florid but searing poignancy that obviously attracted composers, even though the music is typically performed only once in the liturgical year - in the last three days of Holy Week. Concomitant with extreme colour evolved the stricture that music composed in support of the Lamentations should be as raw, pared down and devoid of ornamentation as possible. The aim was literally to avoid joy.

This generous CD contains an anthology of European Renaissance music written to commemorate the re-dedication to God which is intended by the verse that ends each reading, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, convertere ad dominum deum tuum' - 'turn again unto the Lord thy God'. Four composers are represented: Agricola, Morales, Arcadelt and Lassus. They span 150 years of a tradition that was already established by the time Agricola's settings appeared in the famous edition of 1506 by the pioneer Venetian publisher, Petrucci.

Agricola's is the longest setting on this CD; it's inward looking, almost ruminatory; certainly meditative. It's also rich in texture, although the pace and approach to the text taken by the Egidius Kwartet is tended ... feeling is overlaid with feeling; yet there is a great sense of peace and centredness by the time the music slowly subsides. Performed with great sensitivity and force by the Egidius Kwartet.

Although short, the extract by Morales, *Taedet animam meam*, is highly concentrated. That's very much emblematic of Morales' style: staid, focused and spare. These are attributes that are equally well conveyed by the singers. Though short, their relationship with the singing is close and purposeful.

Arcadelt's is the composition most at variance with the conventions: order, initial letters and choice of texts all follow the composer's, rather than established tradition's, way. It's distinct in other respects: there is greater directness and less reticence, a less subdued approach, than in the Agricola, say. Such variety adds to the appeal of the CD's selection. Indeed, Arcadelt is perhaps the composer whose work is least known and thus whose output would repay closer attention.

The lion's share of the music here is by Lassus, who composed two complete Lamentations settings - in five and four parts. We hear the latter on this disc; it's generally actually more melismatic than the five-part setting. Its richness places it amongst Lassus's most persuasive works. Then the Gregorian chant-based *Responsoria* complement the composer's polyphony. They are performed by the three-person Gregoriana. The Egidius Kwartet also has a knack of underlining Lassus's variety - their singing makes us aware of the composer's contrasts and many moods. Yet without gimmick or rush.

The Egidius Kwartet is a Dutch group founded in 1995 by members of Ton Koopman's Amsterdam Baroque Choir with the aim of performing and recording Renaissance music in particular from the Low Countries - in the widest sense of that term. Their style is precise, clean and very distinctive; their pronunciation unmistakably local to that part of Europe.

In their performance there's respect, sombreness, and a darkness appropriate to the material in hand - but illuminated by perception. And theirs is a very quiet and unselfconscious awareness of the beauty and weight of this music at that. The members of the Egidius Kwartet impart a timelessness to the singing that is truly captivating. The Arcadelt in particular seems to flow and flow out of nothing back into nothing: the feelings of loss, regret and suffering under affliction are

gently and tenderly expounded until one is totally involved and enfolded in what is not a spectacular sound. But a very carefully managed and highly focused one.

Similarly, the richness of the seven pieces by Lassus is evident without being laid on too thickly. It's music the singers obviously know very well: they can thus afford to hint at understatement, hint at what lies behind and beyond the notes with the smallest gestures of tempi and relative texture.

Refreshingly, there is also a slight sense of 'under-polish'. Not every note, nuance and nicety is buffed to perfection, as would be the case if the Tallis Scholars, say, were singing. The individual qualities of the four - or five in the Morales and Arcadelt, where they are joined by bass-baritone Bas Ramselaar - voices are constantly audible and add to the immediacy and personality of the music ... listen to the changes in tempo and dynamic at the end of the First Lamentation by Lassus. Magical yet also very real.

The recording is good, though a little uneven in places with some hiss. The notes in the accompanying booklet by Peter de Groot are short but to the point. The texts in Latin and English are rather cramped, but useful.

There are no equivalent recordings of the Agricola and Morales. Superb alternatives for the Arcadelt are the anthology on Eufoda (1248) by the Currende Vocal Ensemble under Erik Van Nevel. And Pro Cantione Antiqua on Regis (RRC1123) under Turner; or King's College Choral Scholars on Signum (SIGCD076) under Cleobury for the Lassus.

There is still much to recommend the present release ... its passion, intimacy, sense of dedication which mixes introspection with competence; and the Egidius Kwartet's unfettered confidence in the way they come to this lugubrious music head-on without maudlin and with a dose of vigour, where perhaps lassitude and dolorousness would be expected. This CD will move and stimulate and should not be overlooked.

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