

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

TONAL PLENITUDE:
Stephen Layton's Polyphony
excels in American works

BBC MUSIC CHOICE



Incandescent choral glory

Polyphony is revelatory in American repertoire, says *Terry Blain*



AMERICAN POLYPHONY

Choral works by Barber, Bernstein, Copland & Thompson
Polyphony/Stephen Layton;
Robert Millett (percussion)
Hyperion CDA 67929 74:09 mins
BBC Music Direct £13.99

It's often the familiar, hackneyed pieces which most fully reveal the character of an ensemble or performer, the mirror in which their

interpretive mettle is most fully reflected. In that respect I've no hesitation in saying this is the finest performance of Barber's *Agnus Dei* I've heard by any choir, live or on record. The sustained tonal plenitude and fabulous breath apportioning of the sopranos in the opening paragraph; the organic emergence of other voice-parts as the textures alter; and the slow-burn kindling of an eventually incandescent climax – these mark the performance with a special intensity, gripping the attention in every bar of music.

Barber's *Agnus Dei* is given a performance of special intensity

There's more Barber: the jabbing accents of 'Mary Hynes' from *Reincarnations* are deftly differentiated, summoning the joyful buoyancy the composer was aiming for, and the suddenly benumbed decrescendo the Polyphony singers achieve on the last word ('grief') of 'Anthony O'Daly' is further evidence of how totally their consummate technique is placed at the service of a piece's meaning and intention. In the third setting, 'The coolin', the enveloping sensuality of the Irish bardic poetry is beautifully rendered in the supple phrasing of the

FURTHER LISTENING

Polyphony/Stephen Layton

PÄRT

Peace upon you, Jerusalem;
Morning Star; The Deer's Cry, etc
Hyperion CDA 68056 62:12 mins
BBC Music Direct £13.99



'Alleluia-Tropus' (2008) originally included eight cellos, but Polyphony's sound is, as always, so rich and beautiful that there is no sense of anything missing.' *January 2015*

G JACKSON

To Morning; Song (I Gaze Upon You);
Cecilia Virgo; Orbis patrorum optime, etc
Hyperion CDA 67708 75:50 mins
BBC Music Direct £13.99



'The 12-part *Cecilia Virgo*, with its cascading, multi-layered downward scales, puts Layton's choir through its paces, as does *O sacrum convivium*, where Polyphony's unanimity of diction at much lower dynamic levels is hugely impressive.' *July 2009*

WHITACRE

Cloudburst; When David heard; I thank
You God for most this amazing day, etc
with Stephen Betteridge (piano), Robert
Millett (percussion); Pupils of The Lady
Eleanor Holles School, Hampton
Hyperion CDA 67543 70:50 mins
BBC Music Direct £13.99



'Cloudburst' is the central piece here, a dazzling kaleidoscope of busy clamour, arcing lyricism, solo and spoken passages, sighing, handbells, wind chimes, inter alia.' *March 2006*

choir, and the affectionate caress of Stephen Layton's conducting.

In Bernstein's *Missa brevis* the singers' electrifying attack, the sentient countertenor solos of David Allsopp, and the peal of tubular bells make for another riveting account – the three combine to particularly ravishing effect in the Benedictus. The clashing harmonies between upper and lower voices at the start of the *Agnus Dei* are held in perfect counterbalance, the moment tense but not melodramatically overstated.

Topping and tailing the programme are two works by Randall Thompson. Tenderness is the keynote of both performances, *Alleluia* the composer's anxious, muted response to the Nazi occupation of Paris in 1940, *Fare Well* his pained response to the intimations of mortality in Walter de la Mare's poem.

A strongly purposeful account of Copland's *Four Motets* belies the composer's own modest assessment of the work, while among the other pieces Barber's raptly expectant *A nun takes the veil 'Heaven-haven'* again confirms the stellar levels of choral technique and interpretive insight achieved by Stephen Layton and his singers.

Hyperion's engineering achieves a virtually ideal balance between allowing a degree of resonance from the church acoustic to warm the textures, and shining light into the inner workings of the vocal writing. That clarity increases exponentially if you buy the recording in the higher-resolution format available on the Hyperion website. A wonderful recital, not to be missed.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

ON THE PODCAST

Hear excerpts and a discussion of this recording on the **BBC Music Magazine podcast**, available free on iTunes or at www.classical-music.com

Q&A

STEPHEN LAYTON

The choral director tells REBECCA FRANKS how he came up with an all-American programme for his choir Polyphony



What inspired this programme?

It was the realisation that the latest American choral composers, such as Morten Lauridsen and Eric Whitacre, owe everything to the real giants before them: Copland, Bernstein and Barber. I have performed Barber's *Reincarnations* many times. There aren't many Copland pieces for choir, so we've often performed those early pieces he wrote in Paris. Curiously the piece I haven't performed very often is the famous *Agnus Dei*. But I knew it, as we all did, and it was an inspiration to think, dare I say, what one might do with that wonderful score with Polyphony singing it.

Is there a specifically American choral sound?

My approach to American repertoire is identical to English: I'm trying to bring across the poetry, particularly for Barber's very fine settings. It's the colours of vowels and sounds that are entwined with the emotional content of what we're doing and the sentiment of the poetry that's always going to be the most important thing. So I can't honestly say there's something distinctively American I'm trying to find. I'm sure, though, that you could listen to the Copland Motets, say, and hear an openness in texture, which we hear in so many of his later orchestral soundscapes, where one might conjure up a view of the prairies. There's a simplicity of harmony, too, which leads us to find something clean and direct about it.

And what about the Bernstein and Randall Thompson works?

Bernstein was one of the great tunesmiths of our time. One feels with his *Missa brevis* that he's excited to make rhythms jive and dance: it follows that 20th-century rhythmic tradition that comes out of Stravinsky. Thompson, in a way, looks forward in the way he uses just one word in his 'Alleluia', almost like spiritual minimalism long before Arvo Pärt or John Tavener. In North America it's one of the best-selling choral scores of all time, so I was aware that everyone would sing it in their choir and that it would represent North American choral music for many.

THIS MONTH'S CRITICS

Our critics number many of the top music specialists whose knowledge and enthusiasm are second to none



Jessica Duchen Critic, novelist
Jessica Duchen writes about music for *The Independent* and is the author of several music-focused novels, plays and biographies. She studied music at Cambridge University and trained as a pianist. She has a wide range of musical enthusiasms, from solo piano and chamber music to opera.

John Allison editor, Opera; critic, Sunday Telegraph	Malcolm Hayes biographer, composer	Tim Parry writer, editor
Nicholas Anderson Baroque specialist	Julian Haylock writer, editor	Anna Picard writer, critic
Terry Blain writer	Ivan Hewett broadcaster, critic	George Pratt emeritus professor of music, University of Huddersfield
Kate Bolton lecturer, New York University, Florence	Daniel Jaffé writer, critic	Anthony Pryer lecturer, Goldsmiths, University of London
Garry Booth jazz writer & critic	Erica Jeal critic, The Guardian	Paul Riley journalist
Geoff Brown critic, The Times	Stephen Johnson writer, BBC Radio 3 broadcaster	Michael Scott Rohan author, editor
Anthony Burton writer, editor	Berta Joncus senior lecturer, Goldsmiths, University of London	Nick Shave journalist, writer
Michael Church critic, The Independent	Erik Levi professor, University of London	Jeremy Siepmann biographer, editor
Christopher Cook broadcaster, critic	Max Loppert critic, Opera	Jan Smaczny professor of music, Queen's, Belfast
Martin Cotton producer	Jon Lusk world music journalist	Geoffrey Smith presenter, Radio 3
Christopher Dingle Professor of Music, Birmingham Conservatoire	Andrew McGregor presenter, BBC Radio 3's CD Review	Michael Tanner critic, The Spectator
Misha Donat producer, writer	David Nice writer, biographer	Roger Thomas critic
Hilary Finch writer, critic, broadcaster	Roger Nichols French music specialist	Kate Wakeling writer, researcher
George Hall writer, editor,	Bayan Northcott writer, composer	Helen Wallace consultant editor, BBC Music
translator		Barry Witherden critic

Key to symbols Star ratings are provided for both the performance itself and either the recording's sound quality or a DVD's presentation

Outstanding ★★★★★
Excellent ★★★★
Good ★★★
Disappointing ★★
Poor ★

BBC Music Direct You can now buy CDs, DVDs or Books reviewed in this issue from BBC Music Direct. The prices are given at the head of each review, and are inclusive of p&p for orders placed from within the UK.

There are four simple ways to order

- Order online at www.classical-music.com/shop
- Call +44 (0)1322 297 515
- Post the order form on p98
- Fax your order details to +44 (0)1689 888 800