

Brahms. The Variations – on what might seem an unpromising tune – are a real find. **WANT MORE?** You might like to explore Stanford's seven symphonies, available on a four-disc set from Chandos (CHAN 9279/82). RICHARD LAWRENCE

Striggio, Tallis ★★★★★

Ecce Beatam Lucem; Missa Ecco si Beato Giorno; Motets; Tallis: Spem in Alium

I Fagiolini/Robert Hollingworth

CHORAL DECCA 478 2734 (CD & DVD)



The Music Striggio was chief musician to the Medici during the 1560s when he celebrated his employer's glory in a motet and Mass in 40 parts (plus an Agnus dei in 60). He crossed the Alps with the works on a pack-horse, flattered an Emperor and visited London where the Duke of Norfolk asked if no Englishman could match Striggio's skill. Enter Tallis.

The Performance Core performers I Fagiolini are augmented by many singers, lutenists, viol consorts and wind ensembles to produce a truly sumptuous sound. The ear is constantly taken by details in the elephantine crowd, a distant tenor laughing up a scale, an abrasive shawm doubling a choir's 'hosanna'. Massive chords move with the slow, stately momentum of a merchant galleon laden with gold. 'You can hear the money!' smirks the conductor on the DVD and he's right. Hollingworth also conducts Striggio motets, some unaccompanied, but with the main work over, the singers sound tired. Tallis's *Spem in alium* is performed with instruments, a legitimate and rare event.

The Verdict The disappointment of discovering that instruments are involved is offset by the splendour and magnitude of Hollingworth's achievement. Unaccompanied Striggio, however, sounds bland. Tallis with instruments is interesting, but still a backward step. The King's Cambridge recording (Argo 425199-2) is still supreme. RICK JONES

Tavener ★★★★★

Choral Ikons – including The Lamb; Song for Athene; The Hymn of Unwaning Light
The Choir/James Whitbourn

CHORAL OPUS ARTE OA CD9007D



The Music The works on this album, suggests Tavener in its introductory note, represent the Logos, the universal manifestation of God's word in all things, with Christ and the Mother of God at the heart of James Whitbourn's programme choice. 'In a sense, all my music seems to emanate from these Divine Beings,' writes the composer.

The Performance Can any earthly choir encompass the 'Divine World' that Tavener's work attempts to reveal? The Choir and its conductor clearly recognise that answering the question involves practical choices. James Whitbourn's singers, seasoned yet still young, robustly engage with compositions that many groups treat with bloodless



The massed forces of I Fagiolini

reverence. Their ensemble discipline and fundamental choral blend are collectively rooted in Oxbridge chapel choir experience. But there's a human warmth to The Choir's sound, more Orthodox than Anglican. It pervades their hypnotic performance of the album's longest piece, the monolithic Hymn of the Unwaning Light, and adds heartfelt power to *Song for Athene*.

The Verdict Those who like their Tavener pure and ethereal should not be deterred from tasting The Choir's more muscular approach to the composer's work. The tonal weight and emotional conviction of their performance opens fresh perspectives on familiar works.

WANT MORE? *Fall and Resurrection* (Chandos CHAN 9800), Tavener's visionary millennium masterpiece, attempts to span all creation in just over an hour.

ANDREW STEWART

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The ear is constantly taken by details in the elephantine crowd

RICK JONES ON
STRIGGIO'S MASS
IN 40 PARTS

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Glories of the Renaissance

Victoria ★★★★★

Hail, Mother of the Redeemer

The Sixteen/Harry Christophers

CHORAL CORO COR16088



The Music Four hundred years after his death, Tomás Luis de Victoria is widely considered to be the greatest composer of the Renaissance. The *Missa Alma Redemptoris Mater* takes pride of place on this survey of Victoria's music written in honour of the Virgin Mary.

The Performance This is a more than worthy 'sequel' to The Sixteen's ecstatically acclaimed – and sounding – 2006 recording of Victoria's Requiem. One is immediately struck by the glow-in-the-dark warmth of the choir's sound; *Missa Alma Redemptoris Mater* is opulent without ever collapsing into indulgence, and Christophers' carefully judged dynamic terracing and vocal balance is ideal for capturing Victoria's radiant intervals and floating frequencies. The six-part *Congratulamini mihi* and joyful *Magnificat octavi toni* are among the other standout moments.

The Verdict This is state-of-the-art Renaissance singing by a choir and conductor who have done more than most to deepen our awareness, and enjoyment, of music created in an ancient world few of us can understand. PHILIP CLARK

Verdi ★★★★★

Choral Works

Barbara Frittoli (sop), Francesco Meli (ten), Teatro Regio, Turin/Gianandrea Nosedà

CHORAL CHANDOS CHAN 10659



The Music Verdi rarely wrote music to order for special occasions, but he made an exception for the London

International Exhibition of 1862 with his choral work *Inno delle nazioni*. It's a grand ceremonial piece for huge forces which combines the national anthems of England, France and Italy with deft skill. Also included on the disc is the haunting and dramatic late work *Quattro pezzi sacri*.

The Performance These pieces need to combine a strong whiff of the opera house as much as they do the church or concert-hall, and the Teatro Regio forces (under the baton of Gianandrea Nosedà) deliver them with a bold sense of drama. The soloists are top-drawer Verdians too: tenor Francesco Meli has an impressively ringing top register, and Barbara Frittoli brings weight, richness and sensitive phrasing to the soprano solos.

The Verdict The Teatro Regio orchestra, though a very fine group, doesn't quite rank in the top handful of international ensembles. What the players lack in ultra-suave polish however, they more than make up for in spirit, and they produce an exciting disc.

WANT MORE? Antonio Pappano's recent account of the *Messa da Requiem* by Verdi won awards by the bucketful, and it's easy to hear why (EMI Classics 698 9362). WARWICK THOMPSON

WHY YOU'LL LOVE THIS

ACE ACOUSTIC

Recorded in a church acoustic, the singers of The Sixteen thrive in their natural acoustic habitat – but the acoustic is resonant without being overly echoey and each line and contrapuntal turn of phrase can be clearly heard.

ENUNCIATING THE ANNUNCIATION

The four-part *Ne timeas Maria* sets the words of the Angel at the Annunciation; Victoria bounces material between the parts, and The Sixteen (or at least four of them) create a seamless cushion of floating timbres.

ORCHESTRAL SINGING

Harry Christophers balances to perfection the need for a unified choir sound with retaining the character of individual voices; deep bass sonorities resonate like orchestral brass and sopranos project with clarion definition.

MATT BRODIE/DECCA