BALAKAUSKAS: *Requiem*

Judita Leitaite, mz; Vilnius Municipal Choir, Christopher Chamber Orchestra/ Donatas Katkus
Naxos 557604—53 minutes

Osvaldas Balakauskas (b 1937) is one of Lithuania's preeminent composers and citizens. Having distinguished himself as both musician and diplomat, he remains the long-time head of the Composition Department at the Lithuanian Academy of Music. His work has won considerable attention and praise in Europe since the dark years of Soviet artistic repression. And after getting acquainted with his remarkable *Requiem* (his sole religious work) in recent days, I can see why. We've covered his instrumental music twice before (N/D 1999, M/A 2001), but this is our first go at his choral music.

The composer's influences are particularly broad. Trained at the Kiev Conservatory by the super-conservative Boris Liatoshinsky, he still couldn't escape the more radical allure of such pioneers as Hindemith, Messiaen, Penderecki, even Xenakis. But his modernist inclinations are tempered by a straightforward sense of almost neoclassical elegance and grace, made all the more palpable by his musical economy and understatement.

Don't look for terrifying drama and grandeur here. The composer's benign, matter-of-fact view of death translates into a mostly subdued and reflective mood. Yet the music attends faithfully to the essential emotions of bereavement and comfort. Rather little of it reaches out and grabs you by the throat; there is no striving for effect. Instead, on repeated listening, it worms its way gradually into the psyche with outwardly simple, but infinitely subtle effect.

He often employs serial techniques, but with a flexible approach that allows for more than just the arrangement of individual pitches: his "series" may well consist of a succession of triads or other logical chord-sequences that lend the music a sense of intermittent tonality. He relies—as did Hindemith—on the "perfect fifth" as the harmonic foundation for succeeding intervals. The music often has a primitive modal twang to it; many passages would be reminiscent of ancient organum but for their truncated, even choppy vocal lines. Rhythms are often complex, but always subservient to the harmonic context.

The work's personal, intimate nature—inspired by the loss of a close friend—is reinforced by the use of a small choir and orchestra. Choral textures are spare and astringent, with striking support from such instruments as harpsichord, trombone, and contrabassoon adding variety and color. Unlike many modern requiems, the composer sticks to traditional Latin texts. The soloist's lines are deftly woven into the choir's harmonic fabric. It adds up to finely wrought and very effective music.

Performances are carefully crafted and committed. Choir and orchestra sound clear and transparent; conductor Katkus achieves admirable interpretive sincerity in music of restrained emotionality. Mezzo Judita Letaite offers sensitive and rich-toned singing, with just a hint of metallic edge now and then. They are very nicely recorded, and we get good notes plus texts. Another very worthwhile effort from Naxos and further evidence of the Baltic region's varied and vibrant contemporary musical scene.

KOOB