

here, and sopranos Joanna Koslowsky and Susanne Ryden shine, pure and bright, as the goody-goody voices of the pious. *Christus ist mein Leben* was one of Rosenmüller's most widely disseminated sacred cantatas and in this spirited performance you can certainly understand why. Christ's words from Luke 23 ('Verily I say unto thee') are meatily delivered by Wilfred Jochens and underscored by a solemn Chaconne in the bass; the work culminates in a chorale verse around which the instruments weave ringing descants – verging on the ecstatic here.

As so often with Cantus Cölln, there's generally more emphasis on precision than unrestrained passion, but with the vigorous collusion of the cornets and trombones of Concerto Palatino there's more than enough extra wind power to go around. The finest serious Christmas disc I've heard so far this year, it is strongly and seasonally recommended.

Simon Heighes

Stanford

Reissue

Requiem^a. The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan – Overture; Ballet Music Nos. 1 and 2; There is a bower of roses^b.

^aFrances Lucey, ^bVirginia Kerr (soprano);

^aColette McGahon (mezzo); ^aPeter Kerr

(tenor); ^aNigel Leeson-Williams (bass);

RTÉ Philharmonic ^aChoir and National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland/^aAdrian Leaper, ^bColman Pearce.

Naxos 8.555201/2 (super-budget price, two discs, 1 hour 44 minutes). From Marco Polo 8.223580/1. English/Latin texts and English translation included. Website www.naxos.com. Producer Chris Craker. Engineer Simon Rhodes. Dates ^aFebruary 12th and 13th and ^aSeptember 16th, 1994.

After the morose opening, there is little here which is either particularly sorrowful or passionate. The stately tread ('Tempo di Marcia funèbre') of the *Agnus Dei* reflects more the mood of national solemnity at the death of Lord Leighton (in whose memory Stanford wrote his Requiem in 1896) than any personal loss, and its eventual transformation into an imposing setting of the words 'Lux aeterna' shows more Stanford the master symphonist than Stanford the profound believer in the life hereafter. The *Sanctus* is a magical movement, certainly, but more for its ingenious orchestration and masterly writing for voices than for any sense of angelic zeal. And while at over 30 minutes the massive *Dies Irae* is the longest single movement in the work – which in itself spans a similar time-frame and calls for similarly extensive resources as the great Requiems of Berlioz and Verdi – it is majestic rather than apocalyptic.

But if the thoroughly Irish Protestant Stanford found it difficult to empathize on an emotional or spiritual level with the essentially Roman Catholic Requiem Mass, he was enough of a craftsman to produce a magnificent

choral work, its many moments of sublime beauty balanced by some wonderful climaxes, his instinctive writing for voices perfectly balanced by his superlative handling of orchestral forces. Yes, Stanford's Requiem is here revealed as something approaching a true choral masterpiece, and while we critics have had our fingers badly burnt in the past by declaring that new recordings of hitherto forgotten repertoire must surely prestage the establishment of these works into the mainstream repertoire (Stanford symphonies on Chandos spring to mind), I, for one, would sincerely hope that other choirs and other record labels will take up this lovely work.

In fact, there is room for a really first-rate performance of this work since this one, originally released on Marco Polo in 1997, is far from flawless. The RTÉ Philharmonic Choir's intonation is not all it might have been and there are very obvious signs of fatigue. Its members certainly raise themselves sufficiently to respond to Adrian Leaper's nicely paced climaxes, but he fails to lift them above the lacklustre in many of the softer, lighter passages.

For their part the soloists give me no such reservations, especially when working, as they mostly do, as a self-contained ensemble. Particularly impressive is Frances Lucey, who, in addition to a captivating duet with a solo violin in the third movement, positively oozes majesty, even at the very top of her register, in the strongly Wagnerian setting of the words 'Rex tremendae'. No reservations, either, about the orchestra, in particular the brass, who show an alertness to Stanford's rhythmic complexities at the start of the *Dies Irae* which rather highlights the soggy of the chorus. With the organ pedals captured in vivid depth, the recording itself is surprisingly full-bodied and opulent, given the dry acoustical setting.

After over 80 minutes of the Requiem there is just enough space to give us a tantalizing glimpse of the first of Stanford's ten operas. Premiered in Hanover in 1881, *The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan* might be considered too contentious in the current atmosphere of Islamic hyper-sensitivity to be staged in an opera house, but its story of a religious leader's 'thirst for power, contempt for humanity and ambition to dominate the world' (to quote from the ever-reliable Keith Anderson's insert notes; David J. Brown also contributes a fascinating biographical essay) certainly inspired Stanford to some colourful orchestral writing, which Colman Pearce clearly relishes in these exuberant extracts. The only vocal extract is an aria which the chief slave of the harem, Fatima, sings to her own lute accompaniment. Virginia Kerr portrays the nostalgia for the good times before she was enslaved to perfection, mingling childlike fondness for remembered treasures with rather more matronly seriousness as she accepts her present plight.

Marc Rochester