

AN OUTSTANDING RECORDING FROM LEIPZIG

Das geistliche Chorwerk.

GENUIN Musikproduktion, Leipzig GEN 88130.

Gewandhaus Chor Vocalconsort, Leipzig. Stefan Engels, Organ. Gregor Meyer, Conductor.

This disc comprises works of considerable importance in Karg-Elert's output; issued in 2008, it includes choral works never recorded before and, regrettably, rarely performed. There could be no more appropriate setting for this recording, made in the city where Karg-Elert worked and taught, nor could the outstanding musicianship of singers and players be bettered. A work which has greatly increased in popularity in recent years, *Sanctus* for Violin and Organ op 48B/1, is also included – an ideal companion for the opus 82/1 setting of the *Benedictus* text which combines intense lyricism with a stunningly dramatic climax. The work's instrumental resources – violin, harp and organ as well as the four solo voices and chorus are fully exploited, demonstrating Karg-Elert's skill in combining orchestral and vocal colour.

The major work in the disc, 'Die Grablegung Christi' op 64, is one of Karg-Elert's most inspired settings, aptly described in Michael Bender's liner notes as 'a musical work of art unequalled in church music'. It really has everything – a prelude for organ and cor anglais, chorale settings (mainly original), a recitative and arioso (from Matthew's Passion narrative) followed by a brief passage for solo oboe, an unaccompanied chorale setting for lower voices (later with cor anglais) and a triumphant final chorus (expanded into ten parts!), whose climactic affirmation of resurrection reappears towards the end of the Third Symphonic Canzona. It is all performed with an intensity and commitment reflecting so well the subject-matter of this *multum in parvo* 'Passionkanzone'.

In all, Karg-Elert made six different versions of his 'Improvisation' based on the hymn 'Nearer, my God, to Thee' associated with the loss of the 'Titanic' on April 15, 1912 together with his friend the oboist Alfred Jochade. In the same year Karg-Elert also composed his opus 81 for chorus, six solo voices, flute and organ (or orchestra) based more loosely on the text, utilizing throughout the motto theme of the music's first line. Preceded by a magical, unaccompanied performance in English of the first verse (in an arrangement by the Gewandhaus Choir's Artistic Director, Gregor Meyer), this elaborate and intensely dramatic piece reflects the depth of feeling which this great maritime disaster aroused in the composer. In consequence, he brought to the work all his considerable skills in vocal and instrumental writing, to which the performers here respond with impeccable sensitivity, specially noteworthy being the six vocal soloists and the flautist, Cornelia Grohmann.

In his Canzona 'Vom Himmel hoch' op 82/2 Karg-Elert expands material from opus 65/10 and op 78/20 with passages for chorus, solo voices and violin. So ingeniously is this done that the work possesses a coherence in which the words of the seven verses set (from Luther's 151) reflect their seasonal message throughout in women's chorus, soprano solo, four-part chorus with descant for boys' voices, double chorus

(setting verses 4 and 6 canonically), treble solo and finally a six-part setting of verse 15 – all accompanied by a highly effective violin and organ part. A specially memorable moment is provided in the concluding 'Alleluia's', which, like the rest of this movement, are performed with a polished precision, reflecting great credit on all the participants.

Although there have been several recent recordings of the *Third Symphonic Canzona* op 85 (Fugue, Canzona and Epilogue), all achieving a very high standard, this performance by the Leipzig musicians could not be bettered. Authenticity is assured in the richly romantic sounds of the Michaeliskirche organ, impeccably played by Stefan Engels, while the composer's specifically requested chorus for four women's voices surmounts the intricate final counterpoint with perfect intonation and apparent ease – no mean feat. Throughout the piece (as in the others where the violin appears) Edwin Ilg achieves superb balance, often at times of considerable complexity, sustaining the music's ethereal quality to the end.

Two works for unaccompanied chorus complete this disc: 'Wir danken dir, Herr Jesu Christ' W11/1 and *Requiem aeternam* op 109. 'Wir danken dir' is an original setting of a three verse Easter hymn, the first of four set for the Christian year and dating from 1909. Each verse varies the setting of the words, displaying the composer's mastery in vocal writing. *Requiem aeternam* is a much more elaborate work, setting only part of the Requiem text, with much doubling of voices up to 12 parts, solo passages alternating with the tutti. The freshness and liveliness of the Gewandhaus chorus is much in evidence throughout both pieces, as is their meticulous attention to detail in interpreting this uniquely atmospheric music.

The Archive is most grateful to all the participants in this outstanding recording, in which the choral forces are further enhanced by singers from the choir of St Thomas's Church, and with especial thanks to Gregor Meyer and Stefan Engels whose direction and accompaniment respectively have ensured such a highly successful result. It's a 'must' for all lovers of Karg-Elert's music – and for those heretics who aren't yet. Order your copy now from:

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