

TRUTH AND FABLE • Matthew Robertson, cond.; The Thirteen • ACIS APL95579
(64:00📖)

ELDER Absalom. **RAVEL** Trois chansons. **HOWELLS** Take Him, Earth, for Cherishing. **VAUGHAN WILLIAMS** Valiant-for-truth. **CASALS** O Vos Omnes. **TOMKINS** When David Heard. **BEACH** Pax Nobiscum. **PAULUS** The Road Home.

Truth and Fable is the fourth album from The Thirteen, a professional chamber choir based in Washington, D.C. The primary reason for this disc seems to be the world premiere recording of Daniel Elder's oratorio *Absalom*, commissioned by the choir and its director, Matthew Robertson. Elder (b. 1986) has built an impressive body of work over the last decade or so, focusing on choral music. Cast in alternating recitatives and laments, Elder pulls from a wide range of styles and techniques to create a dramatic chamber work that is challenging for both the performers and the audience. The choir gives the piece a committed reading, moving between lyricism and spiky dissonance, between spoken text and sweeping lines. Ravel's *Trois chansons* follows, a neoclassical contrast to the larger scale of the oratorio. Robertson infuses Ravel's matter-of-fact writing with flashes of emotion, and the French diction is clear and natural-sounding, especially from the solo quartet in the second movement. *Take Him, Earth, for Cherishing* is one of the most memorable performances on the album. Howells blends the lush sonorities of nineteenth-century Anglican anthem with modernist touches and an undercurrent of early music, a nod to the fourth-century text by Prudentius. The choir is confident and responsive, allowing Robertson to shape flowing lines and dramatic climaxes.

Valiant-for-truth is taken from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; Vaughan Williams apparently made several unsuccessful attempts to set this text before arriving at the present work. There are a number of fine recordings available of this piece, but Robertson and The Thirteen stack up well against competitors, offering a taut reading that is crisp and restrained. In 1932, Catalan cellist Pablo Casals set the Tenebrae response *O vos omnes* for the Benedictine Monks of Montserrat. The meditative motet is treated gently by the choir here, and Robertson has chosen a subdued approach free from distracting theatrics. Among the highlights of the entire recording is Thomas Tomkins's anthem *When David Heard*, a masterpiece of seventeenth-century English polyphony. The singers create shimmering textures and treat the anguished dissonance with a subtle coolness that is particularly arresting. The other world premiere recording on the album is Amy Beach's haunting *Pax Nobiscum*, published shortly before her death in 1944. This is an exquisite performance, clean and heartfelt; it sets a daunting standard for future choirs recording this work. The program concludes with a *The Road Home*, a folk-inspired piece by Stephen Paulus. All the works on the album coalesce around the themes of conflict and reconciliation, and one is left with the impression that this disc is the choir's attempt to make sense of a turbulent, conflicted world. Whether as a concert or an album, the program is thought-provoking and the performances here are tasteful, expert, and certainly work a listen.

James V. Maiello

Four stars: Tasteful performances, thought-provoking program