

somebody else could have written it, and I rather think that somebody else did. However, as my piano teacher used to say, when we get to heaven we can ask Bach ourselves.

It is on that heavenly note that I would leave you, inviting you to enjoy a beautiful, clean performance on a richly colorful organ in a dream of a Baroque South German church. Kudos to Peter Holder for a job well done.

1. See “BWV 565: Composer Found?” *The Diapason*, January 2013.

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TRUTH & FABLE. The Thirteen, Matthew Robertson, artistic director. Acis APL95579. Recorded in May 2019, this disc is one of many whose origins now take on an enormous and unexpected meaning, given that it was published during a pandemic of extraordinary dimension and impact. *Truth and Fable* is an exquisite recording by the Washington, D.C.–based professional vocal ensemble the Thirteen, whose twelve singers are led by Matthew Robertson, the group’s founding artistic director. While the recording’s stated *raison d’être* is dealing with the duality of violence and reconciliation, as one reads the titles of the eight powerful works and their texts, it is impossible not to juxtapose other pairs of muses, such as suffering and release, death and redemption, sorrow and joy.

Each work is a remarkable and logical successor to what precedes it, or a well-reasoned invitation to what follows. Out of the gate comes Daniel Elder’s *Absalom*, a near 30-minute vision not only of the historic Absalom, son of King David,

including his demise, but a host of creative conjecture, of juxtapositions of biblical and royal histories, as well as an impassioned call for peace. Scored chiefly for unaccompanied chorus but also for piano, played impressively by Raffi Kasparian, and occasional percussion instruments, played by the singers themselves, *Absalom* is a vocal tour de force, with its every demand met by the Thirteen, with apparent effortlessness. This is an inspired composition that merits admiration, respect, and many performances.

Ravel’s *Trois Chansons*, certainly a dramatic contrast with *Absalom*, present ballads about the oddities of love and the tragedy of war, as well as a host of warnings, all in the composer’s own words. At every turn the performance here is dazzling and captivating. One of the several shift-shocks occurs next, with Herbert Howells’s ravishing “Take Him, Earth, for Cherishing,” a heartbreaking setting, in the composer’s unique and incomparable style, of a fourth-century tribute to a fallen leader, which in our time may be easily applied to all who have died for tragic, inexplicable reasons. This is one of the greatest choral works of the last century, revealed as such by an impassioned, stunning performance.

Vaughan Williams’s “Valiant-for-Truth,” with words by John Bunyan, does not let the listener off the hook after the emotional torrent brought on by the Howells work. Instead, the choir sings convincingly of battles, wounds, and rewards. Following this work is Pablo Casals’s “O vos omnes” (prophetic words from the Old Testament later placed in the mouth of Christ on the cross) in a rich and appropriately somber setting. Casals ensures that everyone, even while mourning, is wrapped in sonic beauty. Displaying the Thirteen’s remarkable stylistic flexibility, next comes a “review” of the Absalom story in traditional, appropriate garb, spun by the 17th-century composer Thomas Tomkins. The disc concludes as it began, with works by American composers. Amy Beach’s “Pax Nobiscum” is a rich and ravishing piece, heard here in its premiere recording. Last on the program is Steven

Paulus’s “The Road Home,” which beautifully sets the folk tune “Prospect,” in what may well be called the recording’s gift of repose and most certainly a benediction.

Recorded in the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, Md., where Robertson is director of music, the disc is well served by the ambience of the space, ideal for a chamber ensemble such as this, providing both clarity and an enriching, embracing warmth, as ably captured by engineer Max Kuzmyak. The liner notes by Rhianna Cockrell are rich with relevance. The booklet itself is a vital partner in garnering appreciation for an endeavor of this sort, because the texts are central to the entire enterprise and are presented here in attractive form. One minor disappointment is the absence of full credit to the authors or sources of these compelling words. While given within the notes, this data must be searched for, rather than the writers being acknowledged as equal partners with the composers.

The Thirteen, founded in 2012, is among a very few professional vocal ensembles who draw their membership from fine singers throughout the country (and beyond). The voices who were gathered to create *Truth & Fable* certainly coalesced to create a ravishing, engaging sound. Beyond their concert performances, these artists and this ensemble are very committed to education, serving in residencies in colleges and universities and frequently working with high school and college students in masterclasses, workshops, and collaborative performances.

This is a significant, praiseworthy recording, one whose beauty and power are revealed in direct proportion to the level of attention that the listener gives. The hour-long journey is an intense one, perhaps eliciting gasps, sighs, or tears along a path that leads from mourning, through perplexities and challenges, to everyone’s basic needs of rest, peace, and home.

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