

# GRAMOPHONE *Collector*

## BUDAPEST MUSIC CENTRE

**Richard Whitehouse** listens to a quartet of choral albums from the adventurous Hungarian label



The Saint Ephraim Male Choir: spirited and idiomatic in Bartók and folk

For two decades the Budapest Music Center has issued a steady flow of recordings that takes in the extent of Hungarian music, not least its foremost living composers, Kurtág and Eötvös. Four recent releases focusing on *a cappella* choral music are considered here.

Most important is a two-disc set devoted to the complete choral works of **Bartók**, a notable area of his output that has inevitably been overlooked outside Hungary but which features music that is hardly less characteristic than his chamber or orchestral works. Aside from the languorous early part-song *Evening*, these are settings of traditional and folk texts – ranging from the concise and animated 27 Choruses for children's and female voices to the three texturally intricate and harmonically complex items that comprise *From Olden Times* for male voices; also included here are two sets of Slovak folksongs in both their Slovakian and Hungarian guises. Such pieces are far removed from the functional ideal as espoused by Bartók's contemporary Kodály, yet are engaging and satisfying as music – not least when given with the conviction of students from the Liszt Academy of Music and Eötvös Loránd University under László Dobszay, with pianist Zoltán Kocsis adding his inimitable presence in two pieces. Anyone who has fought shy of such music should certainly try this.

Those, conversely, who would prefer a selection of these pieces should go to the disc **Bartók and Folk**, on which the composer's six works for male choruses are interspersed with Hungarian and Slovak folk music that presents many of these traditional sources in something approaching their original incarnation. Under the astute guidance of Tamás Bubnó, the Saint Ephraim Male Choir gives performances that are hardly less spirited or idiomatic than those on the previous set; with Márk Bubnó making an evocative contribution on *gardon* (described as a 'percussive cello') and Balázs Szokolay Dongó with the bracing sounds of flute, bagpipe and *tárogató* (an instrument of Turkish origin which approximates to the clarinet). The overall sequence offers an engrossing interplay of folk and art music, intriguing and provocative by turns.

That liturgical music has not been neglected by a younger generation of composers is evident from the disc **Hungarian Contemporary Vespers**. Those two sequences featured here, moreover, are subtly contrasted as to content and aesthetic. Thus the *Sunday Vespers* by Zolt Serei (b1954) remains audibly faithful to its medieval sources by interspersing plainsong with settings whose allegiance to tradition is continually yet restrainedly underlined. On the other hand, *Vesperae per annum* by Péter Zombola (b1983) is a longer and more elaborate service that

ranges freely over the ancient and modern of sacred choral music, its often dense textures offset by bells and a frequently hypnotic organ part. The performances by Schola Cantorum Budapestiensis, as directed by Tamás Bubnó and János Mezei, leave nothing to be desired.

The Saint Ephraim Male Choir is featured on the final release here. **Orientale Lumen II** refers to the second of its annual series which aims to present the Greek-Byzantine liturgy in the secular context of a public concert. This two-disc overview, edited from performances given during 2013-14, features a wide range of music that juxtaposes traditional Moldavian, Bulgarian and Greek chants with pieces by composers over two centuries apart; among them (relatively) familiar items by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov, alongside present-day figures such as Márk Bubnó and György Philipp, then closing with the powerful *Te Deum* by Dmitri Bortnyansky. The conviction of the music-making, once again directed by Tamás Bubnó, is enhanced by the spacious yet immediate ambience of St Stephen's Basilica in Budapest that places a discreet halo of resonance around the solo contributions of singers Márta Sebestyén, Tünde Szabóki and Nektaria Karantzi – resulting in a composite choral work as diverse as it is involving.

Each of these releases comes with succinct yet highly detailed annotations that are never less than informative, but it is a pity that English translations could not be included on either of the Bartók discs (could these not have been made available via the BMC website?), while the decorative typeface used in the booklet for the complete choral works is hardly designed for easy or pleasurable reading. Reservations aside, these are valuable discs that fill gaps in their repertoires and further confirmation of BMC's commitment to the cause of Hungarian music. **G**

## THE RECORDINGS



**Bartók** Complete Choral Works  
choirs / László Dobszay  
BMC (M) ② BMCCD186



**Bartók** 'Bartók and Folk'  
St Ephraim Male Choir / Tamás Bubnó  
BMC (F) BMCCD220



**Hungarian Contemporary Vespers**  
Schola Cantorum Budapestiensis  
BMC (F) BMCCD211



**Orientale Lumen II**  
St Ephraim Male Choir  
BMC (M) ② BMCCD217