

Pastorale French Choral Music

Vasari Singers/Jeremy Backhouse; Jeremy Filsell (piano)

Guild GMCD 7199 (full price; 1 hour 17 minutes)

Texts are included. Producer Ben Turner

Engineer: Paul Newis - Date February 25th-27th 2000

Canteloube: Chants d'Auvergne (Bailèro) . L'amour de moi

Debussy: Trois Chansons de Charles d'Orléans

Delibes: Les Norwègiennes . Les Nymphes des bois

Fauré: Madrigal, Op. 35 . Pavane, Op. 50

Massenet: Chansons des bois d'Amaranthe

Ravel: Trois Chansons

Saint-Saëns: Sérénade d'hiver . Deux Chansons, Op. 68 . Hymne ou printemps

Saint-Saens: Deux Chansons, Op.68 - Les fleurs et les arbres

Vasari Singers/ Jeremy Backhouse

Against the prevailing Romanticism of his time, Saint-Saens (1835-1921) represented a more conservative writing tradition. In his work, he sought clarity and order, preferring 'art for art's sake' rather than programmatic associations. Saint-Saens's output includes many choral works, and this song (translated as 'the flowers and the trees') is the second of two partsongs composed in 1882 and set to anonymous texts.

Classic FM

Pastorale

DEBUSSY: 3 Chansons; SAINT-SAENS: Sérénade d'hiver; 2 Chansons; Hymne au Printemps; DELIBES: Les Norwègiennes; Les Nymphes des Bois; RAVEL: 3 Chansons; FAURE: Madrigal; Pavane; CANTELOUBE: Bailèro; l'Amour de Moi; MASSENET: Chansons des Bois d'Amaranthe

Jeremy Filsell, p; Vasari Singer / Jeremy Backhouse

This is worthy of the choral aficionado's attention for the generously apportioned repertoire - as delightful as it is seldom performed. Delibes's "Nymphs des bois", Massenet's "Oiseau des bois" from his *Amaranthe* songs, Ravel's chansons, and the Saint-Saëns "Serenade" are just some of the charmers that await you. While I can't say I love everything the Vasaris do, they are polished professionals who sing with commendable spirit. The fellows can be especially good, as you'll hear in the Saint-Saëns "Sereande to Winter". Ravel's "Ronde" quivers with energy, while Massenet's "Oiseau des bois" is sweet and flirtatious to a fault. I'm less impressed with the cool, clear soprano soloist who adds no sparkle at all to Debussy's "Tambourin" or Ravel's

"Birds of Paradise". A slow, stodgy Fauré "Pavane" and some forced crescendos in the Saint-Saëns "Hymns to Spring" also detract. But the good outweighs the not so good by a comfortable margin, and the repertoire is a joy.

GREENFIELD *American Record Guide* - March/April 2001

This is distinguished singing from a superb choir, and - for once - a programme of music by seven composers does not appear as a hodgepodge of little appeal. There is some astonishingly original choral writing here, particularly to be found in those pieces which are almost never heard, and the reasons for their neglect can have little to do with the quality of the music.. Delibe's *Les Norwégiennes*, with a remarkable 'Slipping on the ice' onomatopoeia, is a case in point, and the first of Saint-Sa, with a remarkable 'Slipping on the ice' onomatopoeia, is a case in point, and the first of Saint-Saëns's *Deux Chansons*, OP. 68 -'Calme des nuits' - is a wondrous piece. It is fascinating to hear Canteloube's *a cappella* settings of two of the more famous of his 'Bailèro' alongside the equally well-known Fauré *Madrigal* and *Pavane*, with piano accompaniment, the choral writing in the latter work coming across with exemplary clarity. So good are these that one might put in a plea for a whole disc of Fauré's church music by the Vasari Singers. Throughout this deeply impressive recital it is well-nigh impossible to choose one track above any other, so consistently attractive and moving are the music and the manner of the performances. The Ravel *chansons*, to his own texts, are brilliantly done here; Masonet's *Amaranthe* songs are a real treasure, and Jeremy Filsell's piano accompaniments are excellent.

The recordings have been carefully balanced with the occasional piano accompaniment in order to maintain the clarity of the choral writing, and the acoustic of the Great Hall of Dulwich College is well suited to this repertoire. Although there is a suspicion of high notes occasionally 'catching' the microphone, nothing should prevent an enthusiastic recommendation for a conspicuously successful album, which is completed by good notes from David Bray. The booklet also has full texts and translations

Robert Matthew-Walker *International Record Review* - February 2001

The composers range from the well-known to the very well-known, but their partsongs, with or without accompaniment, are a closed book to most listeners. Rather than presenting a chronological sequence, or at least putting together all the pieces by the same composer, the Vasari Singers have chosen, as listed above, a programme based on maximum variety, alternating styles and periods, songs with piano and ones without, pieces for males only, females only and full choir.

The trouble is, the initial enthusiasm I felt on reading the programme and the very full notes rather cooled as I actually listened. For one thing there is a wide gap between the works by Debussy and Ravel, whose austerities require repeated and concentrated listening (though Ravel's *Trois beaux Oiseaux du Paradis* is a beautiful little piece) and the burbling charm of Delibes and Massenet. The former, with his filigree piano writing and operetta-like melodies seems delightful at first but both his pieces are far too slender to sustain their length. Massenet, writing in the same vein, is more succinct and so more enjoyable. I don't know if these two extremes will appeal to the same listener, at least not on the same occasion, and switching back and forth continually instead of just once, half-way through, doesn't make it any easier.

So another problem is that not all the music is very good. Saint-Saëns's *Sérénade d'hiver* is delightfully imaginative, and the op.68 songs are harmonically resourceful if melodically unmemorable, but *Hymne au printemps*, after a lively start, is incredibly doleful and plodding, quite missing the joy of the words that it sets. I shan't be returning to that again.

The real gem is the Fauré *Madrigal*, a beautiful example of his passionate coolness. The *Pavane* is well-known and much loved in its orchestral version, but was this piano score intended for performance or rehearsal? Jeremy Filsell certainly makes a good case for it (he plays well throughout but the acoustic makes the piano sound glassy above mezzo-forte). No choir has yet convinced me that the choral parts are other than skilfully pasted onto a piece already complete in itself.

The Vasari Singers are good but they do sound very English. This is in part because they fail to relish the pungency of the typical French vowels, especially the notorious "u". "On-fwee" for *enfuit* may pass muster in the schoolroom, but this is a professional recording. It is also because their style of voice production is that of the English cathedral choir, too lacking in natural vibrations for this repertoire.

Texts are provided, with translations that are both stilted and inaccurate. To get "Slide, O slide, I am beside you, Ice is danger beautiful" out of *Glisse, glisse, traineau rapide*, *La glace est perfide* shows a certain misdirected imagination, and I always thought *roses* were roses, not lavender.

So I'm afraid this is a record for those who already have a particular interest in this repertoire rather than the general listener in search of new experiences.

Christopher Howell *Classical Music On The Web - October*