

Readers should be alerted to a considerable amount of spoken dialogue in French for which no text either in French or in translation is provided in an otherwise informative if confusingly laid-out booklet. This is fine for an audience whose native tongue it is but less so for some others of us. Collectors of the series will, of course, want the latest instalment, but initiates might do well to take the plunge elsewhere in the available volumes, perhaps the 'Idylle sur la Paix' (Accord 465 345-2).

Nicholas Anderson

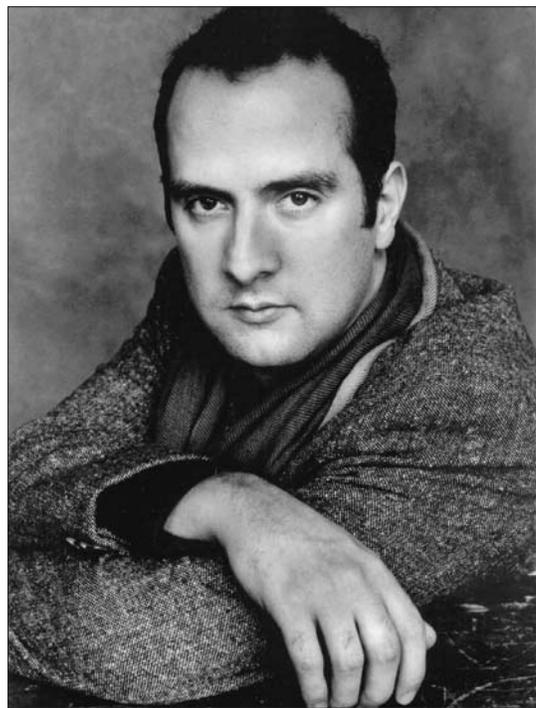
O'Regan

New CD/SACD

Threshold of Night.

Care Charmingee Sleepe. The Ecstasies Above. Had I Not Seen the Sun. I Had No Time to Hate. Tal vez tenemos tiempo. Threshold of Night. Triptych. Conspirare/Craig Hella Johnson.

Harmonia Mundi USA HMU807490 (full price, 1 hour). English/Spanish texts and French/German translations included. Website www.harmonia-mundi.com  Producer Blanton Alspaugh. Engineer John Newton. Date October 2007.



Tarik O'Regan

Marion Ettlinger

Following hot on the heels of the superb 'Scattered Rhymes' (reviewed in June 2008) comes 'Threshold of Night', another disc featuring the music of one of the most gifted young British composers writing for massed voices at the moment, Tarik O'Regan. Where the former release had to share space with works by Machaut, Dufay and Gavin Bryars, this is seven-course O'Regan – and what a feast it is.

O'Regan was educated at Oxford and Cambridge Universities; he now divides his time between New York City and Trinity

College, Cambridge, and is currently working on an opera based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conspirare comprises three separate ensembles: a professional chamber choir, a symphonic choir whose members include a mix of professional and volunteer singers, and a children's training choir. This recording features the first-mentioned ensemble, enhanced by a string orchestra and under the direction of Conspirare's founder and artistic director Craig Hella Johnson.

This programme of music for voices and strings begins and ends with two Emily Dickinson settings that were specially commissioned for this recording by Conspirare: *Had I Not Seen the Sun* and *I Had No Time to Hate*. As O'Regan says in his booklet notes, 'They frame the programme rather like a compositional "inhalation" and "exhalation", a crescendo and decrescendo or a prelude and postlude.' *The Ecstasies Above* is an atmospheric setting of a poem by Edgar Allen Poe, while the award-winning *Threshold of Night* was written for Advent and is a setting of one of Kathleen Raine's *Three Poems of Incarnation*.

Another work commissioned by Conspirare for this recording is O'Regan's setting of Pablo Neruda's *Tal vez tenemos tiempo* ('Maybe we have time'), the only work on the disc not sung in English. *Care Charmingee Sleepe* is a song from John Fletcher's 1614 play *Valentinian III*. Originally it was set by the lutenist and composer Robert Johnson, but O'Regan has here prepared a choir-and-strings version, especially for this recording, of his own setting for double choir. *Triptych* brings together two separate commissions. The first movement was written for the inaugural concert of the Choir of London in Christ Church, Spitalfields in 2004; the second and third movements were commissioned by Portsmouth Grammar School and first performed by the school's chamber choir and the London Mozart Players in 2005.

Conspirare is one of America's leading vocal ensembles, and it's easy to hear why in these superb performances. The gradual opening-out of *Had I Not Seen the Sun* is beautifully managed, as are the solo parts by soprano Melissa

Givens and tenor Jonathon Subia. This is Dickinson's 'wilderness' indeed, though preparing a space for the inrush of music to follow. The great expanses of calm over which a solo violin or soprano soars; the ecstatic dances; the surging rhythms: these are likewise animated by a fine sense of balance between precision and abandon in *The Ecstasies Above* and point to the combination of restless urgency and refulgent string passages in *Triptych* while providing a perfect counterpoint to the glowing transparency of *Threshold of Night*.

Providing yet more contrast is the Neruda setting, all the more powerful for its homophony and here invested with an almost painful inner tension by the performers. O'Regan's exquisite setting of *Care Charmingee Sleepe* recalls the same simplicity and directness while admitting of greater textural complexity. Of the latter, O'Regan says that, while not referring to Johnson's music, he was interested in 'emphasizing the juxtaposition of Valentinian's violent death and the peaceful beauty of Fletcher's words'. The effect is quite surreal and very moving, the use of strings and voices also recalling the Renaissance combination of choir and viol consort.

My only complaints with O'Regan's writing are a sometimes too-insistent use of repetition of words or lines and a density that results in a loss of the poetry's own special music, but there is much to compensate and he does write beautifully for the voice. The use of pedals or drones over which vocal arabesques play with sinuous clarity; the shimmering polyphonic textures in which the homophonic passages are reflected like Moorish architecture in a fountain; the supple and often surprising use of rhythm to underscore a poetic idea: all these are constant sources of delight and to be found in abundance on this exceptionally well-recorded and presented release. **Robert Levett**

Monteverdi

New

Primo Libro dei Madrigali. Nono Libro dei Madrigali.

La Venexiana (Roberta Mameli, Nadia Ragni, Francesca Cassinari, sopranos; Raffaele Giordani, Giuseppe Maletto, tenors; Matteo Bellotto, bass; Gabriele Palomba, theorbo; Marta Graziolino, harp; Anna Fontana, harpsichord)/**Claudio Cavina** (countertenor).

Glossa GCD920921 (full price, 1 hour 13 minutes). Italian texts and English/French/German/Spanish translations included. Website www.glossamusic.com  Producer Sigrid Lee. Engineer Roberto Meo. Date July 2006.

Comparison:

Primo Libro dei Madrigali:
Delitiae Musicae/Longhini (Naxos) 8.555307 (2001)

This is the last volume in La Venexiana's now-complete Monteverdi (madrigal) Edition and affords an opportunity to hear the composer's early and late styles in close proximity. The resulting contrast is readily apparent – though not as great as you might think.

Monteverdi's *Primo Libro dei Madrigali* was published in Venice in 1687 by Angelo Gardano; it was the 19-year-old composer's third published collection after his *Madrigali spirituali a quattro voci* (1583) and *Canzonette a tre voci* (1584), but his first devoted to the secular madrigal. The *Nono Libro dei Madrigali*, published posthumously in 1651, is surely a misnomer – apart from the four madrigals