



***Frohlocke nun!* (Rejoice Now!)- Christmas music from Berlin between Baroque and Romanticism**

**Carl Philipp Emanuel BACH (1714-1788)**

*Meine Seele erhebet den Herren (H deest)* [10:00]

**Carl Heinrich GRAUN (1703/04-1759)**

*Kommt Christen, feiert dieses Fest* [18:09]

**Johann Friedrich AGRICOLA (1720-1774)**

*Kündlich groß ist das gottselige Geheimnis* [16:09]

**Carl Friedrich ZELTER (1758-1832)**

*Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* [07:19]

**Johann Friedrich REICHARDT (1752-1814)**

*Weihnachts-Cantilene:*

*Holdseliger, gebenedeiter Knabe* [02:39]

**Carl LOEWE (1796-1869)**

*Die Festzeiten, oratorio op. 66: Advent* [03:38]; *Weihnachten* [05:47]

**Felix MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY (1809-1847)**

*Christus, oratorio (unfinished): Die Geburt Christi* [06:10]

• Dennis Chmelensky (treble); Olivia Vermeulen (contralto); Jan Kobow Patrick Vogel (tenor); Matthias Vieweg (bass)

Staats- und Domchor Berlin, Lautten Compagny Berlin/Kai-Uwe Jirka

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• CARUS 83.442 [70:40] 

German early 18th century music we hear today was mostly composed in Leipzig, Hamburg, Frankfurt or Darmstadt or at one of the many aristocratic courts - seldom in Berlin. It is only

with composers like the brothers Graun, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Quantz that Berlin enters the picture. Although Berlin was a dominantly protestant city there was little or no interest in religious music as it was performed on a regular basis in for instance Leipzig or Hamburg. And Christmas had turned from an ecclesiastical feast into an almost secular celebration for the bourgeoisie. This disc presents some music which according to Christian Filips in his programme notes was performed in Berlin. The first three items are from the archive of the Berlin Singakademie which was rediscovered in Kiev in 1999. That in itself doesn't prove that these works were indeed performed in Berlin, but it is certainly possible.

The disc opens with a piece by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach - his contribution to a pasticcio. It dates from his time in Hamburg, when he had already left Berlin. It begins with a chorus, which is an arrangement of the opening movement of his own Magnificat which he probably had written for his application as Thomaskantor in Leipzig in 1750. Here he uses a German text rather than the original Latin text. The other parts of this cantata are set to a free poetic text, as the next section which is a chorus: "God cares for thee, how can anything afflict thee?" Then follows an aria for alto, which - like most arias on this disc - is clearly operatic and includes a cadenza. The rest of this cantata was written by someone with the name of Hoffmann, and who as yet has not been otherwise identified. His contribution has been omitted which is really a shame.

Next is a cantata by Carl Heinrich Graun, one of the Graun brothers who were active at the court in Berlin. Carl Heinrich was the opera composer and that is noticeable in this cantata in which the recitatives are set to an orchestral accompaniment. The cantata, which is written for the first Christmas day, opens with a recitativo accompagnato for tenor which is followed by a chorus in *da capo* form. The bass then sings a recitative followed by an aria in which the strings are joined by a trumpet and timpani. A recitative-aria pair for alto is followed by another recitative for the tenor and the cantata closes with a chorale. No biblical texts are used.

Things are different in the cantata 'Kündlich groß ist das gottselige Geheimnis' by Johann Friedrich Agricola. It dates from 1758 and was commissioned by the court. The opening chorus is based on a verse from Paul's first letter to Timothy: "Manifested is the divine mystery: God is revealed in flesh". It is followed by a long secco recitative for alto and bass and an alto aria which is purely operatic in style and includes a cadenza. It is not quite a *da capo* aria any more: after the B section only the instrumental introduction to the A section is repeated. A recitative for soprano and bass is then followed by a chorus on the opening verse of the Magnificat. Here Agricola adds a concertante organ part. The tenor then has a full *da capo* aria which starts with the line "Rise, fall, flow around" which is illustrated in the vocal part. The cantata closes with the last stanza of a traditional Christmas chorale: Puer natus in Bethlehem.

Carl Friedrich Zelter had been a member of the Berlin Singakademie since 1791 and became its conductor in 1800. 'Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme' is one of a series of chorale arrangements he composed in 1802. It is an intriguing mixture of old and new. In the first stanza which is homophonic, the original melody is clearly audible but Zelter sometimes turns away from it in order to illustrate passages in the text. On "Erwacht!" (awake) the original melody moves downward whereas Zelter writes an ascending figure. The harmonic language of this stanza is reflecting the aesthetics of the time. But the second stanza is set as an *arioso* for tenor with a basso continuo part which wouldn't be out of place in a baroque cantata or oratorio. The last stanza is set for choir and soloists; the first half we hear the *cantus firmus* in the basses and the *basso continuo*. The piece closes with a fugue, another relic of the baroque era. It should be added that the text Zelter uses was written by the poet Klopstock; only elements of

the original text of 1599 have been preserved.

Johann Friedrich Reichardt composed a number of dramatic works but also many songs on texts by poets like Gleim, Goethe and Schiller. The aria 'Holdseliger, gebenedeiter Knabe' for soprano and instruments comes from a choral work entitled 'Weihnachts-Cantilene' which dates from 1786.

With the music by Loewe and Mendelssohn-Bartholdy we have entered the romantic era. Each tried to revive the traditional German oratorio. 'Die Festtage' by Carl Loewe is a compilation of previously written cantatas on texts from the gospel of St John. Here two excerpts are performed: the instrumental introduction to Advent and the annunciation scene from the Christmas part. The tenor acts as the Evangelist and then the choir sings the chorus of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest". During this chorus the chorale 'Vom Himmel hoch' is used as *cantus firmus*.

Mendelssohn planned an oratorio on the life of Christ, like Handel's *Messiah*, but due to his death it remained unfinished. We hear the recitative for soprano 'Da Jesus geboren war', the trio 'Wo ist der neugeborne König der Juden' and the chorus 'es wird ein Stern aus Jakob aufgehen'.

All pieces on this disc, with the exception of the fragments from *Christus*, are recorded here for the first time. It is very interesting to hear sacred music for Christmastide from a region in Germany which is better known for its orchestral and chamber music. That was the repertoire mostly played at the court of Frederick the Great. The operas performed in Berlin at the time are another aspect of musical life in Berlin from around 1750. They have hardly been explored at all.

As far as the sacred music is concerned the cantatas by Graun and Agricola - who translated Pier Francesco Tosi's famous treatise on singing in German - are interesting. They suggest that it will be worthwhile further to explore their sacred oeuvre. I also was intrigued by Carl Loewe, who today is best-known for his songs with piano. The fragments of his oratorio *Die Festzeiten* have made me curious about this work. I would like to hear the whole oratorio.

Apart from the quality of the programme it is the level of the performance which makes this disc recommendable. The Staats- und Domchor Berlin which consists of boys and men is not among the best-known choirs in Germany, but here it demonstrates its considerable qualities. The choruses are very well sung and in several of them members of the choir also sing small solo parts. Dennis Chmelensky is a member of this choir; in 2008 he won the German youth music competition 'Jugend musiziert'. He has a nice voice, although I was surprised at the amount of vibrato he uses. He would do well to discard it. He sings a couple of recitatives and the solo part in Reichardt's 'Holdseliger, gebenedeiter Knabe'.

The alto, the tenors and the bass give fine performances also. I was a bit surprised that in the oratorio by Loewe the tenor part is sung by Patrick Vogel rather than Jan Kobow. I would have preferred the latter, even though Patrick Vogel sings his part well. The orchestra does a good job here too, but I want to know whether there has been a change of instruments from the 18th-century to the 19th-century repertoire.

From a historical perspective there are some question marks about the performance of the tutti parts. Was a choir used in the cantatas by Graun and Agricola. Were these originally performed with one voice per part, as seems to have been the case in many cities in Germany in

Bach's and Telemann's time? The end of the 18th century saw the birth of the choir as we know it, and one of the specimens of this kind was the Berlin Singakademie. It was founded in 1791 and consisted of members of the bourgeoisie. The mother of Felix Mendelssohn joined the choir in 1796, so we may conclude that it was a mixed choir. Historically speaking the performance of the late 18th century and the 19th century repertoire with an all-male choir is dubious practice.

These considerations apart this is a very good recording which is especially commendable to those who look for good but less familiar repertoire for Christmastide.

*Johan van Veen*