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Performance: Sonics (S/MC): /

Kjell Mørk Karlsen (b. 1947) is a prolific Norwegian composer, noted particularly for his sacred choral pieces. The Royal Court announced on 25 September 2009 that the king had appointed Kjell Karlsen the honour of being Knight of the First Class of St. Olav "for effort as a church musician and composer." Karlsen is also a fine chorus trainer, choirmaster, conductor and also plays keyboard parts for the Oslo Symphony Orchestra. He also has a great interest in period instruments, particular the oboe, and was the founder of the Pro Musica Antiqua ensemble in 1969.

His St Luke Passion Op. 153 (2006) follows his first Passion, that of St John (1991). Given the overall supremacy of JS Bach's masterpieces in the idiom, it must be a brave composer who follows in the master's footsteps. As a music-drama, the Baroque examples are perhaps the most satisfying to listeners because the story texts are inherently musical because of their status as operatic-style recitatives. In modern terms, the story-telling usually emerges as a spoken narrative, which is much more difficult for the composer to integrate with the purely musical parts of the sacred drama.

Karlsen's St Luke Passion has a structure of narrative recitations (in which the organ also plays an important part, introducing, underlining the text emotionally and meditating on its import), interspersed by mainly 8-part mixed choruses, some of which are a cappella, others accompanied by organ. The organ is important as the "glue" of the Passion elements, and behaves like a wayward continuo.

Tor Grønn is the excellent organist, skilfully using the resources of Bergen Cathedral's present organ (1997) by the Austrian company Rieger Orgelbau. Much of the organ sequences are slow and soft, often underlaid by very deep soft pedals, but as it follows the unfolding drama of Christ's judgement by Pilate and his crucifixion, the organist has to respond to searing climaxes of dissonant chords in *plein jeu* in a concertizing style and roaring reed sub-basses. He also has to accompany Nils Ole Oftebro, one of Norway's best-known actors, a member of the National Theatre's ensemble for over 40 years. Oftebro speaks very clearly and draws every bit of drama from the selected sections of the Gospel of St Luke. Norwegian is thankfully quite a musical language in itself, so that even those without any knowledge of the language can at least sense the moods of the narrative.

Unfortunately, although the extracts from Luke are noted in chapter and verse form in the booklet (not always contiguous), there are no texts or translations. I tried to remedy this by compiling a text in English, following chapter and verse as listed, but the Norwegian track titles do not appear to always coincide with the choral texts which follow the narration. Thus finding which extract from Luke begins Disc 2 of this set was very confusing - not to say distracting. I found it best to relax and

listen to the Passion musically, although the choral parts, sung in Latin, are given both Norwegian and English translations. It would have helped if Lawo would have included a brief precis of the Biblical selections.

Karlsen's sources for his nine choral sections are eclectic, informed by his studies of early church music. They are in Latin and are commentaries on the Gospel extracts. Words are taken from early liturgical texts for Good Friday, and these sections from the modern Catholic Missal's coverage in Holy Week are still in use. Musically, the choruses owe much to Russian Orthodox church music and Gregorian Chant, and although modernised with some note-clusters, these challenging settings are uniformly beautiful and dramatically effective. Bergen Domkantori are quite a large mixed choir, and under the baton of Magnar Mangersnes they have a beauty and purity of tone which truly makes the nine choruses have a radiant effect. The choir also provides solos, and their voices rising from the massed chorus and floating into the Dom's acoustic are very atmospheric.

Although this disc is plainly aimed primarily at the home market, the high quality and sincerity of Karlsen's writing, together with the highly professional sound of the Bergen Domkantori, make for an attractive hybrid double set. The booklet notes are in Norwegian and English, and the Latin hymns are also translated to Norwegian and English.

Lawo's engineering in the spacious Bergen Cathedral finds an excellent balance between chorus, narrator and organ within the generous ambience, with little loss of detail. This disc works particularly well in multichannel (although no mention of this appears on the packaging, nor is there any indication that this is a hybrid SACD production).

Although I certainly recommend this album, whether or not you will buy it depends on your reaction to having a Norwegian actor speak the Biblical texts. I'm also not sure if this is a work and performance which one would listen to often. One possible solution to this, for those less interested in the liturgical importance of the St Luke Passion, would be to program just the nine choruses - although these tracks also carry often quite lengthy organ solos. All in all, it might be a good idea to hear some of the Passion before committing. However, I have no doubt that it is an effective modern Passion.

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