

Johann Simon Mayr *La Passione*, oratorio in two parts for Solists, Choir and Orchestra.

Stabat Mater in C minor for Solists and Orchestra.

Maria Jette, Claudia Schneider, Hartmut Schröder, Robert Merwald, Vocalensemble Ingolstadt, Georgisches Kammerorchester Ingolstadt, Franz Hauk, director and harpsichord continuo.

Guild Music 2002 GMCD 7251/2

Guild Music's new release concentrates on two fine examples of Simon Mayr's early sacred music. As with Mayr's late *Missa Solemnis in C minor* (1826) [Guild GMCD 7231] these performances are under the direction of Franz Hauk and his Ingolstadt orchestral and choral forces. The four soloists bring a youthful and committed performance to an oratorio of vitality and integrity. *La Passione* dates from 1794 and therefore ranks among Mayr's earliest compositions. There are now available on disc examples of the composer's late and early periods. They make for a rewarding comparison, just as do the operas *Che originali* (1798) [Guild GMDD 7167/8] and *Medea in Corinto* (1813) [Opera Rara OCR 11]. The above recordings are the best performed examples of Mayr's music available from the CD catalogue and provide the listener with fine examples of his undoubted genius.

It is sufficient to listen to *La Passione* to realise that Mayr was by the end of the eighteenth century a new voice in Italian music, breaking with the world of Cimarosa, Paisiello and Salieri. Whilst remaining faithful to the Italian gift for melody, he introduced a new strength from Viennese classicism, especially from his mentor Haydn. The fluency of the vocal line is always paramount whilst a masterful use of the limited orchestral forces at his disposal carry the voice forwards, shading and painting the concepts being expressed. The relationship between the visual arts and music was a theme that Mayr often referred to in his notebooks. When Donizetti began his career he was recognised immediately by the public as a student of Mayr due to his use of the orchestra that gave the instruments ample scope to add colour to his melodic line.

The instrumental recitatives and arioso sequences of *La Passione* admirably illustrate these qualities, be it Joseph of Arimathea describing the Way of the Cross or the powerfully moving sections portraying the ordeal of Christ

on the cross. Few listeners will remain unmoved, and perhaps will become enchanted by this work of absolute sincerity. It could easily find its way back into the repertory, especially during Passion Week in the Baroque and Rococo churches of southern Germany and Austria, the theatrical mood of which the oratorio's text admirably encapsulates with its direct appeal to the emotions. All the arias and the one duet remain with the listener and grow in strength on more than one hearing. It is, quite simply, an exceptional work.

It is a known fact that Mayr's first opera, *Saffo*, swept Venice with success and was hailed as the opera of the day. It dates from the same year as the oratorio and may be *La Passione* gives a good idea of the musical quality that won the hearts and minds of the Venetians. During these early years Mayr composed six oratorios, four were for the Ospedale dei Mendicanti and were consequently composed for female voices; the remaining two were composed for Forlì, *La Passione* and *Il sacrificio di Jefte*. These gave the composer a greater freedom for he was freed from Venetian conventions and was no longer limited to girl's voices.

The *Stabat Mater* which fills up this generous set of discs likewise dates from what may be called the 'Venetian Period'. It admirably illustrates Mayr's early religious music before he moved to Bergamo and founded his school; due to popular pressure operatic conventions found their way into his sacred music; that is, except for the compositions closest to his heart that reflect his love for early plain chant and Palestrina.

Franz Hauk ensures a committed performance of both works knowing when to move the music forwards and when to allow the vocal line follow the solemnity of the drama. His soloists, choir and orchestral forces give good, clear performances. Here is yet another 'Mayr milestone' from the composer's university town of Ingolstadt. Highly recommended.

John Stewart Allitt

