

STEMBAND

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MADE IN BELGIUM - BRUSSELS CHAMBER CHOIR

I welcome the recently released “Made in Belgium” CD by Helen Cassano and the Brussels Chamber, a portrait of contemporary polyphony our country’s three regions, bridging the traditional divides which all too often blinker our vision as artists, musicians, citizens and, ultimately, as human beings. By one of those quirks of Belgian humour, we have an expat to thank for this: Helen Cassano was born in London and lived in Madrid before coming to Belgium.

From very first track, the listener is struck by the BCC’s vocal quality and consummate musicality, both in the colour and blend of its voice parts and in their overall balance. The rounded phrasing and refined dynamics suggest a demanding level of choral preparation.

The chosen repertoire ranges from sacred music to Flemish and Walloon folk songs, and includes compositions on texts by Belgian, French, British, Irish and Dutch poets. Whilst the aesthetic quality of the sacred pieces is at times reminiscent of Flemish Primitive painting, with its attention to detail and its world vision bordering on the mystical, the rest of the repertoire displays an eclectic array of musical influences: Gregorian plainchant, modal harmonies, impressionism, suspended dissonances.

An interesting feature of the collection is that all the composers, apart from Guy-Philippe Luypaerts (who died in 1999), are currently active on the Belgian and international musical stage, not only as composers, but also as singers, instrumentalists, teachers and conductors. Alongside well-known personalities, the album also showcases promising young talent: it seems that choral polyphony, with roots stretching far back through the centuries, remains a vibrant means of expression to this day.

The recording leaves one with the same overall impression as when beholding a fine sculpture or relishing the subtle interplay of half-tones and chiaroscuro of a canvas. The fifteen tracks on the album are ordered in what may at first seem a rather stark juxtaposition, but this obliges the listener to pause and listen to each piece in isolation, thus appreciating its specific beauty.

This commendable initiative seeks to reconnect with the Golden Age of Franco-Flemish polyphony, echoing the life of Orlando Lassus, that bulwark of the Renaissance with roots in his native Mons and a truly international stature, a composer whose mysticism went hand in hand with a strong sense of humour, and whose ecstasy was both spiritual and carnal.

This new recording offers a vivid snapshot of the polyphonic scene in modern-day Belgium, both through its choice of pieces and the manner in which they are performed, and I very much hope it will pave the way for other similar ventures.

Bruno Crabbé