

# Arvo Pärt's Spiritual Imagination Infuses an Exciting Disc From Glorïae dei Cantores

BY STEVEN WINN , May 11, 2020

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Glorïae dei Cantores

Solemnity. Silence. Spiritual immersion. Spatial dimension. Centuries-old styles.

Tags for the Estonian composer **Arvo Pärt**, 84, come easily to mind — perhaps too easily. Listeners may think they know what they're in for before they've actually listened.

In a substantial and gratifying recording by the Massachusetts ensemble **Glorïae dei Cantores**, it's the variety of Pärt's expressive powers over many decades, not the sameness, that shines through in six sacred works. From plainsong-like purity to multivoiced clusters that float entrancingly into and out of dissonance, the composer's affinity for the human voice covers the spectrum. The writing for string instruments is wonderfully diverse as well, with surges of 19th-century lyricism set off by patient minimalism and perky pizzicato gambits.

Titled **Stabat Mater**, for the single longest work on the program, the Naxos disc showcases both virtuosic solo singing and ensemble cohesion. The whole is the sum and then some of its excellent constituent parts. Richard K. Pugsley conducts with clarity, sensitivity, and an instinct for high-impact moments.

Right from the top of the recording, in the brief *Peace Upon You, Jerusalem*, Pärt's gift for animating a text bears rich fruit. Sopranos Rachel McKendree and Sr. Armanda Ortoloni, ethereal yet urgent, sing



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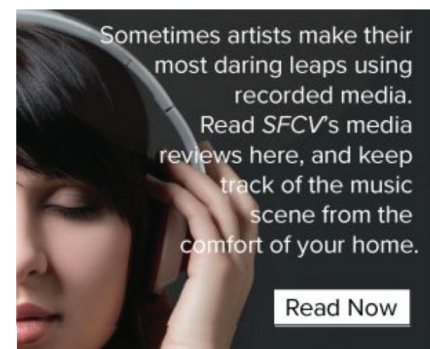
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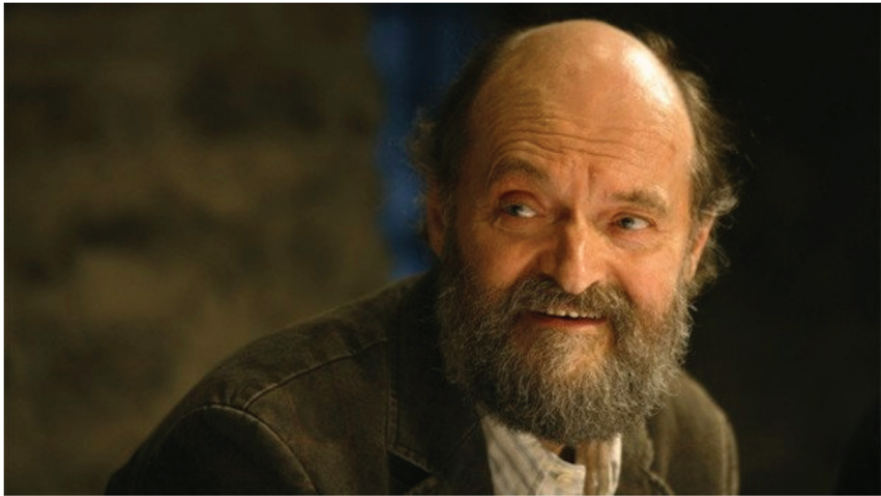
**Pärt-ing Ways in the Garden of Eden**

ARVO PÄRT  
ADAM'S LAMENT

the answering voices in this Psalm 122 celebration of a temple pilgrimage. Echo effects, an oscillating decrescendo and a loftily sustained high note are like dramatic lighting effects illuminating the mighty chord clusters mounted by the chorus.

Another short work, the 2001 *Nunc dimittis*, opens with male voices, the low registers soon gently pierced by Ortoloni's soprano. Together they create a slowly rising tide of multivoiced chords, which finally erupts in an exultant outburst. Later, as if the waters were restabilizing, the men anchor a tonic chord.

High and low voices commune in the acapella *Magnificat* of 1989. The women, keyed by McKendree's soprano, billow out drifting clouds of labile harmonies. The men, emerge from underneath these celestial wanderings in a composition that feel at once capacious and tightly wrought.



Arvo Pärt | Credit: Peeter Langovits

Pärt's masterly *Stabat Mater* deploys 20 stanzas and orchestral interludes over a 25-minute running time. The work opens with a gorgeous string prelude of parallel descents. That lays the groundwork for first one and then a second intense vocal exclamation. The instruments and voices remain in vital conversation throughout, with melodic motifs recurring in new guises. The strings caper and keen. Tempos hasten as nowhere else on the recording. Vocal clusters build and dissolve. It all feels yoked to a driving purpose, at once fervent and consoling.

Not everything pays off so handsomely. Pärt can feel precious at times. *L'abbé Agathon* has its share of deliberate lumbering before its narrative invention takes hold. The story involves the desert dialogue of an abbot and a leper. The setting gradually takes on an operatic complexity, with recitative, arresting choral commentary, and shimmering string chords.

The performances throughout radiate conviction and urgency, a sense of belief in every phrase that's sung or played. While there's no shortage of Pärt recordings, initiates and novices to his will find an ample, wide-ranging, and rewarding selection of his absorbing music here.

**Steven Winn** is a San Francisco based free-lance writer and critic and frequent City Arts & Lectures interviewer. His work has appeared in Art News, California, Humanities, Manhattan, Symphony Magazine and The San Francisco Chronicle.

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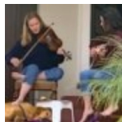
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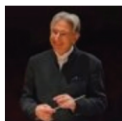
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Performance: ★★★★★  
Sonics (Stereo): ★★★★★

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MUSIC

### Pärt: Stabat Mater - Gloriæ Dei Cantores



Gloriæ Dei Cantores GDCD 065

Stereo/Multichannel Hybrid

Classical - Vocal

Arvo Pärt:  
Peace Upon You, Jerusalem  
L'abbé Agathon  
Salve Regina  
Magnificat  
Nunc dimitis  
Stabat Mater

Gloriæ Dei Cantores  
Richard K. Pugsley, conductor



### Review by Mark Werlin - May 4, 2020 02:48 pm

In “Stabat Mater: Arvo Pärt”, a collection of sacred works for choir, organ and strings, vocal ensemble Gloriæ Dei Cantores weave a musical tapestry out of the inextricable strands of worldly and spiritual life.

The sacred music of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt found a worldwide audience through the 1984 ECM New Series release “Tabula Rasa”, which included his compositions “Fratres” and “Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten”. In CD format, Pärt’s music was in a sense secularized — given a commodity presentation with ECM’s distinctive black and white graphics — and placed in a context removed from the origins of sacred music, the Church. In this new SACD, Arvo Pärt’s music returns to that source.

The members of vocal ensemble Gloriæ Dei Cantores perform music not as a profession in the secular sense of the word, but as a religious vocation, with no less commitment than their professional counterparts. The ensemble’s concerts and recordings are distinguished by a devotional character that arises from their ongoing practice of choral services in the Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans, Massachusetts.

The church was designed along the lines of early Christian architecture, and is the home of the Gloriæ Dei Cantores ensemble. The singers participate in weekly and seasonal worship services, including evensong and liturgy of the hours in Gregorian chant. In preparation for this recording, each member committed to studying and reporting on Arvo Pärt’s compositional style, demonstrating a level of engagement well beyond that of most professional classical organizations.

Included in this disc are a range of compositions: *Peace Upon You, Jerusalem* (2002), *Salve Regina* and *Nunc dimitis* (2001), to the lengthy dramatic works, *L'abbé Agathon* (composed in 2004, revised in 2008 for two soloists, female choir and string orchestra) and *Stabat Mater* (composed in 1985, revised in 2008). Over the years, Pärt has revised some pieces many times, and inspired other artists to do their own arrangements; in my SACD collection are Kuniko's renditions for percussion (*Cantus - KUNIKO*), Jörgen van Rijen's for trombone and chamber orchestra (*Fratres: Bach, Pärt - van Rijen*) and the Berlage Saxophone Quartet's for saxophones and violin (*In Search of Freedom: Weill / Shostakovich / Pärt / Schulhoff / Eisler - Berlage Saxophone Quartet*).

The compositional style of Arvo Pärt has been labeled "tintinnabuli", a term which the composer tends to mystify:

"...I must search for unity. What is it, this one thing... Traces of this perfect thing appear in many guises – and everything that is unimportant falls away. Tintinnabulation is like this. . . . The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation."

Conductor Paul Hillier, a champion of Pärt's music, characterizes the two voices of tintinnabuli style, which Pärt labels M-voice (melodic line) and T-voice (tintinnabuli line), as analogous to the condition of sin, and the redemptive experience of forgiveness. In the music, tintinnabuli style can be recognized in Pärt's frequent use of stepwise minor scale melodies (M-voice) in counterpoint to lines drawn from the triad and from the overtone series of cast bells (T-voice). But reducing Pärt's work to an ambiguous term and a rudimentary description of its workings fails to account for the range of effects produced within these self-imposed limitations. On first listening, the works can appear repetitious and harmonically static; but closer listening reveals the subtlety and complexity of his method.

In his *Magnificat*, Pärt's skillful use of chromatics, space and dynamics, elevates the work from mere "holy minimalism". There is a natural flow into his *Nunc Dimitis*, in keeping with the practice of singing the two works in the evensong services of the Anglican Church. The striking gruffness of the low notes for the male voices, in Pärt's system, corresponds to the "hum" tone of church bells; the low voices die away in the distance, like bell tones disappearing in the air.

"*L'abbé Agathon*", in this arrangement for soprano, baritone and string ensemble, was inspired by a tale about the Desert Fathers, monks who lived in the early centuries of the Christian era in the deserts of Egypt. The legend recounts a meeting between the hermit Agathon and a leper who tests Agathon's unconditional acceptance and charity toward the excluded Other. Only after these trials does the leper reveal himself as an angel sent by God.

The dramatic line is rendered vividly through the remarkable performance of soprano Rachel McKendree, who conveys the leper's disguise through shadings of vocal characterization suggestive of hardship and bitterness, only to reveal the angel's true identity in the climactic phrase "*Béni es-tu, Agathon, par le Seigneur du ciel et de la terre*" sung in her pure voice. It's an exhilarating musical gesture that signifies the sudden, awe-inspiring appearance of the divine messenger. The silence that follows, just preceding the ending passage, suggests that Agathon's true reward is not a brief glimpse of the celestial, but the enduring silence of God.

Pärt's setting of the 13th-century *Stabat Mater* is notable for the clarity of his part writing and the capacity of his simple melodic lines to convey abject suffering. Conductor Richard K. Pugsley elicits from the choir a wide range of emotional expression, from the anguished call to share in the pain of the dying son, to the soft hush of weeping in compassionate solidarity with the bereaved mother. Ritornello passages for the strings add further urgency, and propel the development towards an emotional climax at the phrase "*Juxta crucem tecum stare, et me tibi sociare in plantu desiro*", where the word "planctu" — lament — soars upwards on a rising crescendo, and falls to earth on the word "desidero", the depth of the lament.



The sumptuous and detailed DSD recording was engineered in DSD by Brad Michel and Dan Pfeiffer. Michel is known to vocal music SACD enthusiasts for his outstanding recordings Britten and Finzi Song Cycles - Mark Padmore and Barber: An American Romantic - Conspirare on the Harmonia Mundi label. Even in two-channel audio, there is a deep soundstage with the organ set at a distance from the choir and the string instruments distributed to their left and right, as they would be positioned in a semicircle in front of the singers.

For all lovers of contemporary sacred choral music, and as an alternative perspective on the music of Arvo Pärt, this recording is highly recommended.

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Performance: ★★★★★  
Sonics (Stereo): ★★★★★

## Review by Raymond Tuttle

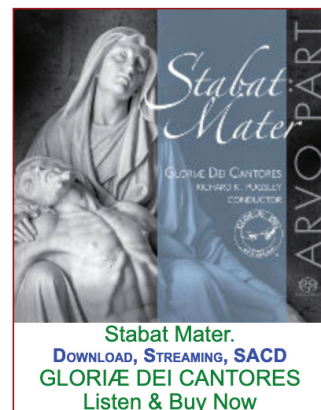
**PÄRT *Stabat Mater. Peace Upon You, Jerusalem. L'abbé Agathon. Salve Regina. Magnificat. Nunc dimittis*** • Richard K. Pugsley, cond; Gloriæ Dei Cantores • GLORIÆ DEI CANTORES 065 (SACD: 69:02 )

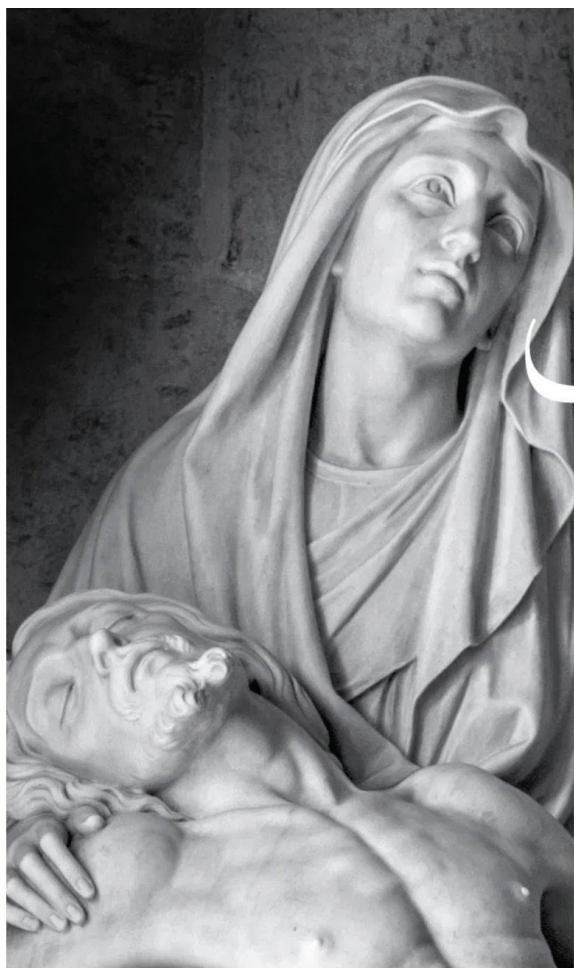
My first experience with the music of Arvo Pärt was an ECM New Series disc released in 1984 that contained *Tabula Rasa*, *Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten*, and two versions of *Fratres*. I suspect that many readers acquired that same disc at about the same time. The performers on that disc include Gidon Kremer, Tatiana Grindenko, Keith Jarrett, and even Alfred Schnittke. That disc set my expectations for what Pärt's music is supposed to sound like, and for how it is supposed to be performed. The many ECM New Series releases that followed it built upon that foundation. Of course other labels and musicians have recorded Pärt's music, but the clear, austere, and coolly beautiful performances and sound quality established and continued by ECM have been widely accepted, and are hard to get out of your head—assuming that you would even want to.

This grave and beautiful new SACD from Massachusetts-based Gloriæ Dei Cantores blows an unexpectedly warm breeze on the Estonian composer's music. Granted, some of the works on this CD are less typical of the composer, and *Peace Upon You, Jerusalem* (composed in 2002 for the Estonian TV Girls' Choir) doesn't use the composer's signature *tintinnabuli* style. *L'abbé Agathon* (composed in 2004 and revised in 2008) is as close as Pärt has come to composing an operatic *scena*, as he brings to life the encounter between Abbot Agathon and a leper, who really is an angel of God come down to earth to test Agathon's charity. The *Salve Regina* from 2002, here performed in its original version for chorus and organ, also departs from the *tintinnabuli* technique, while retaining the composer's gift for quiet emotive power. These works expand our knowledge of who Pärt is as a composer, and they are performed with great polish—but also with a purity that feels uniquely unaffected—by Gloriæ Dei Cantores and by soloists from the choir.

The remaining three works are more characteristic of Pärt, and have been performed and recorded more frequently than the others. The lengthy (28-minute) *Stabat Mater*, which gives this disc its name, and which brings it to a close, is one of the composer's masterworks. Pärt specified that a string trio should accompany a trio of singers; here, the string parts have been doubled (cello) or tripled (violin and viola), and the full choral complement is used, but this does not bother me because the composer, who seems like a very practical man, himself prepared a version of this work for mixed chorus and orchestra. If you want to hear the original version, Paul Hillier's Harmonia Mundi disc (reviewed in *Fanfare* 36:2 by Lynn René Bailey) is superb, as is the one on ECM New Series's *Arbos* disc. Hearing Kristjan Järvi's Sony disc with the RIAS Kammerchor, however, is what really helps you to put a finger on what this new Gloriæ Dei Cantores disc is all about. There is a warmth here that one does not as readily hear in European recordings of these works. Indeed, the closing minutes of the *Stabat Mater* are heartbreaking on this new recording. Part of the reason, I think, is that the engineers have brought Gloriæ Dei Cantores into the foreground; the European recordings keep the singers further back, effectively objectifying them. However, one must admit that these new American versions simply are more emotional, without being any less musical.

I am sure it is no coincidence that this SACD has been released during Lent, although no one could have foreseen that it would be released during the novel coronavirus pandemic as well. In troubling and uncertain times, this is just what the doctor ordered, no matter what your spiritual beliefs might be. **Raymond Tuttle**





# Stabat Mater

GLORIAE DEI CANTORES  
RICHARD K. PUGSLEY  
CONDUCTOR



ARVO PÄRT

## ARVO PÄRT (1935): "STABAT MATER" – GLORIAE DEI CANTORES

CD E DVD BY RICCARDO VIAGRANDE - 11 APRILE 2020

**Peace upon you, Jerusalem; L'abbè Agathon; Salve Regina; Magnificat; Nunc dimittis; Stabat Mater.** Gloriae Dei Cantores. Rachel McKendree, Amanda Ortolani (soprani), Alexander Pugsley (baritono), James E. Jordan (organo) Richard K. Pugsley (direttore). **Registrazione:** Chiesa della trasfigurazione, Orleans, settembre 2018, maggio e settembre 2019. T. Time: 69' 02" **1 CD GDC recordings**



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"The highest virtue of music, for me, lies outside of its pure sound. The particular timbre of an instrument is part of the music, but it is not the most important element. If it were, I would have surrendered to the essence of music. Music exists for itself ... two, three notes ... the essence must be there, independent of the instruments ...".

This statement by **Arvo Pärt** summarizes significantly the musical poetics of the Estonian composer who, through an original expressive and compositional research that has developed in various stages, characterized by adherence to totally different techniques and languages such as dodecaphony or Renaissance music or Gregorian chant, he came to the creation of a new style he called *Tintinnabuli*. After attending the Conservatory of Tallin, Pärt actually started composing in 1958, approaching the dodecaphony in the sixties which was a short parenthesis and which ended in the seventies when the composer closed in a form of voluntary silence to devote himself to the study of singing Gregorian and Renaissance music. In the same years the composer matured his conversion from Lutheranism to the Russian Orthodox church and in 1976 he applied for the first time in the composition *Für Alina* the new style he devised which he called *tintinnabulare* from the Latin *tintinnabulum* which means bell; it is based on two voices of which, a jingleit is characterized by the arpeggio of the triad, whose sounds are treated by the composer as if they evoked bells, while the second moves diatonically. This style, influenced by Pärt's mystical experiences and religious songs, is not only a musical expression, but also involves his vision of life and his attitude towards existence, as can be seen from what he himself stated:

"Tinkling is an area around which I sometimes wander when looking for answers - in my life, in my music, in my work. In my dark hours, I have the certainty that everything outside of this thing has no meaning. The complexity and the many facets alone confuse me and I have to look for unity: what is this thing and how do I find the way to reach it? The traces of this perfect thing appear in many forms and everything that is not important vanishes. Tinkling is like this ... The three notes of a triad are like bells and that's why I call it tinkling. "

Over the past twenty years, Pärt, which has become a reference figure on the world music scene, has won several awards such as the prestigious Ratzinger prize conferred in 2017.

Contemporary composer among the most performed worldwide, today **Pärt** is the protagonist of a CD published by the **GDC recordings** label in which his choral production is proposed starting from *Peace upon you, Jerusalem*, which, created for the female choir a chapel with the presence of two solo sopranos, is a testimony to the deep faith of the Estonian composer attentive to the expressive values of the text, consisting of an extract of Psalm 122 in the version of the New Jerusalem Bible. The text of the second song, *L'abbè Agathon*, which uses a staff consisting of violas, cellos, female choir, soprano and baritone, is instead taken from a legend, in which the eponymous protagonist, who went to the city to sell objects, is tested by a leper who turns out to be an angel and who asks him to use the proceeds from the sale of the objects to buy things from him. Musically it is a work of great charm in which the story is entrusted to the female choir, while a baritone and a soprano support the parts of the Abbè and the leper respectively. The deep religious sentiment of Pärt finds its most intense expression in the other passages of the CD: the *Salve Regina*, composed in 2001/2 on the occasion of the 1150th anniversary of the foundation of the Abbey of Essen; the suggestive *Magnificat*, which is configured as a perfect synthesis of tonal writing and tintinnabular technique; the *Nunc dimittis*, where Simeone's encounter with the Baby Jesus in the temple is commemorated, majestically created by Pärt with a triad of C sharp minor, and finally, the *Stabat Mater* which, composed for a choir of sopranos, contralto and tenors and an instrumental staff made up of violins, violas and cellos, commissioned by the Berg Foundation on the hundredth anniversary of the composer's birth, is a particularly intense work from an emotional point of view thanks also to the combination of particularly slow writing with the tinkling technique.

To perform these songs are the *Gloriae Dei Cantores*, a group founded in 1988 in Orleans, Massachusetts, which, under the direction of **Richard K. Pugsley**, interprets these works, with great technical mastery (homogeneity, attention to dynamics, phrasing), but above all with great involvement creating pure atmospheres of enchantment, which truly touch the heart and soul of the listener, transporting it to a high and profound spiritual dimension. In this high-level context, the technical-vocal qualities, the interpretative sensitivity of the soloists, from the luminous sopranos **Rachel McKendree** and **Amanda Ortolani**, to the beautiful baritone timbre of **Alexander Pugsley** stand out even more. Also in evidence is **James E. Jordan** on the organ.



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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN  
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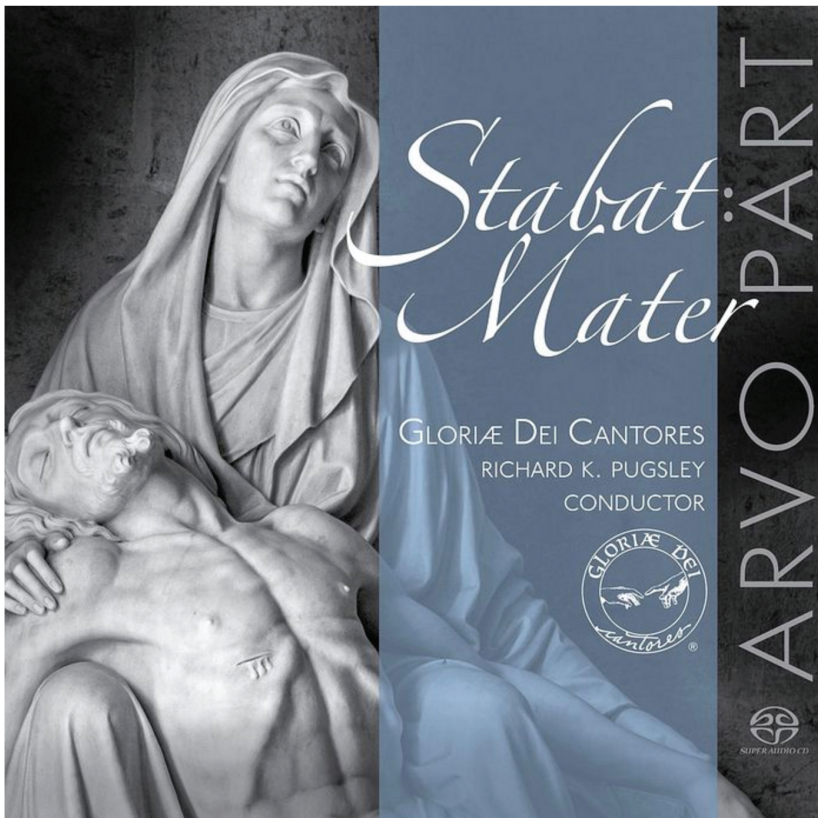
## How to Respond to Lawlessness

Met. Luke of Zaporozhye and Melitopol  
Summing up, I like would to stress that you should always take an active position, especially in matters of paramount importance, which is exactly what the question of the

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## ARVO PÄRT – STABAT MATER

A new and deeply moving expression of the Truth that sustains the Universe



Stabat Mater, the new CD recording of music by the composer Arvo Pärt, performed by the Choir and orchestral ensemble of Gloria Dei Cantores under the direction of Richard K. Pugsley, represents a new and fresh take on sacred music, and it also is a new level reached by the performing artists and the sound engineering team that recorded this disc.

Arvo Pärt has been steadily gaining prominence in the classical music world for many years. His work became known to me around 2011, when a colleague of mine, Dr Nicholas Reeves, worked with the Estonian composer on a concert series performed that year. Although I had yet to hear Pärt's compositions, the enthusiasm Dr Reeves expressed was very strong.

The world of Orthodox Christian composers and musicians is very small in the West. Few composers have been effective at transmitting the *ethos* of the Eastern Orthodox Church through the lens of Western classical and choral music. Most of us (for I compose as well), find ourselves hitting a wall when trying to bring these two worlds together, with the usual result for decades being rather hit-and-miss in terms of any sort of authentic Orthodox Christian *ethos* in Western sacred music.

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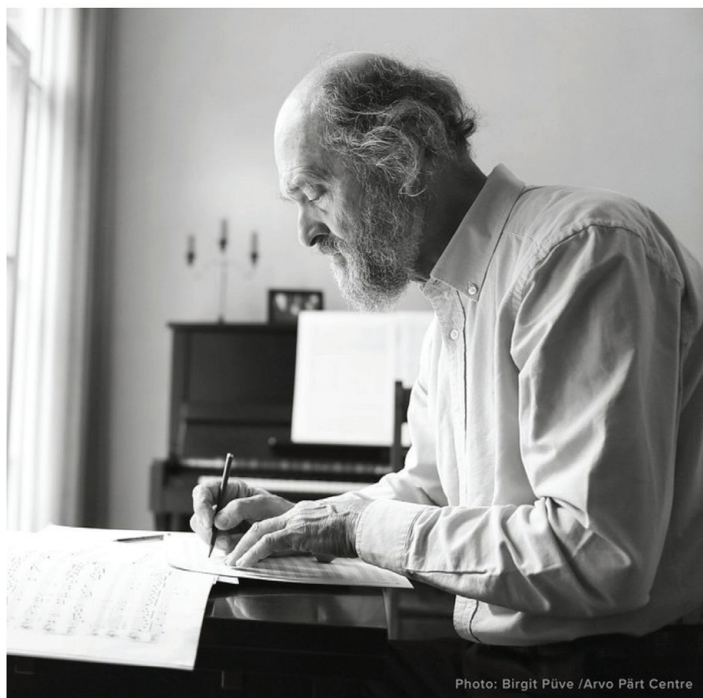


Photo: Birgit Püve / Arvo Pärt Centre

Arvo Pärt

Arvo Pärt is one of the very few composers who has accomplished excellence and beauty in his approach. This CD, *Stabat Mater*, presents a stunning example of what happens when a deeply Orthodox worldview meets the heights of Western classical training and performance.

As a singer, composer and recording engineer that is deeply immersed in the Russian and Byzantine Orthodox Christian musical traditions, when I started to listen to the disc, I was challenged by something that was evocative of recent modern Western sacred works, but almost immediately the Orthodox ethos came through. That ethos is reflected in Pärt's compositional form of *Tintinnabuli*, which reflects something far different from the sentimentality of many great Western sacred works, but does something that is present in Orthodox Christian worship: It pushes the listener not into a memory of sacred events, but to "enter in" and be mystically present in those events, just as the Divine Liturgy and other liturgical services in the Orthodox Church also do. The form in which this happens is delightfully *different* from the techniques employed in the Slavic and Byzantine ethos, and while borrowing on Gregorian chant structure, Pärt's *Stabat Mater* does not merely meditate on the passion of Mary at the foot of her Son's Cross, *we become mystically present with her*.

All the selections on this disc are excellent. This is very serious music, not dark, not depressing, but possessing the serious, dead-on presentation that the Eastern Orthodox Church has always used in bringing us into the Divine reality of Christ's life, Passion, Death and Resurrection. To move beyond sentimental meditation into being present is a great gift, and Arvo Pärt gets us there in his work.

This is more evident when taken into account that the performers of Gloria Dei Cantores and Richard Pugsley approach this work steeped primarily in the Benedictine tradition of the Christian West. In listening to this disc, I cannot imagine a better interpretation of this music, both technically and spiritually, than what is presented here. A true meeting of East and West, neither side excluding the other, but standing *united* in the Truth of Christ. This is what happens on this disc.



Richard K. Pugsley

The recording is superb. Maestro Pugsley, Paul Tingley co-produced this record, and the recording engineers Brad Michel and Dan Pfeiffer did a superlative job bringing this recording to life. The presence of the choir and orchestra is intimate and spacious at the same time, with all nuances of voice and instrument flawlessly presented to the listener.

With some Grammy Award nominations and wins on projects I have worked on as an experiential basis, I enthusiastically and gratefully congratulate this team on an absolutely amazing work. I am very pleased that this recording is a part of my own collection.

More information about *Stabat Mater*, with a sample, can be found [here](#).

5/6/2020



# Review by Colin Clarke

**PÄRT** *Peace upon You, Jerusalem*<sup>1</sup> . *L'abbé Agathon*<sup>2</sup> . *Salve Regina*<sup>3</sup> . *Magnificat*<sup>4</sup> . *Nunc dimittis*<sup>5</sup> . *Stabat Mater* • Richard K. Pugsley, cond; <sup>1,2,4</sup> Rachel McKendree, <sup>5</sup> Amanda Ortolani (s); <sup>2</sup> Alexander Pugsley (bar); <sup>3</sup> James E. Jordan (org); Gloriæ Dei Cantores • GLORIÆ DEI CANTORES 065 (SACD: 69:02 𐀀)

After a splendid disc of music by Leo Sowerby by Gloriæ Dei Cantores that I reviewed in *Fanfare* 42:4, expectations were high for this disc dedicated to the choral music of Arvo Pärt. It turns out that the music may be more familiar, but the standard of performance is just as high, and just as dedicated. The superb, close recording ensures one is constantly engaged.

The title of the disc is *Stabat Mater*, and it is with a setting of this that the program climaxes. But there is a succession of pieces leading up to it that are no less enthralling. The brief *Peace upon You, Jerusalem*, a setting of Psalm 122 scored for women's voices, is fresh as a daisy. It requires great skill and control to sing, particularly at those moments when the texture thins to just one voice, or when one voice peels away from another by a semitone.

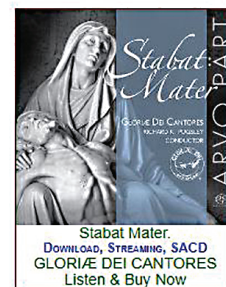
Scored for solo voices (soprano Rachel McKendree and baritone Alexander Pugsley), choir, and violas and cellos, *L'abbé Agathon* tells the story of one of the Desert Fathers (religious people who voluntarily entered into a life in the desert to understand the life of Christ) who meets a leper who is actually an angel in disguise. The work throughout sounds like Pärt and no one else; and yet it includes not only the string narrational quality, but more drama than one might perhaps associate with this composer. Soprano Rachel McKendree is particularly emotive in the work's later stages.

Although *L'abbé Agathon* uses strings, the present recording opts for the version of the *Salve Regina* for choir with organ. There's no missing the Gregorian chant-like nature of the opening choral melody, given in octaves. Harmonies can act as windows of light in this decidedly liturgical setting. This piece asks huge amounts of the participants: perfect pitching from the choir to ensure the clashes remain maximally expressive, and that the more radiant harmonic openings-out achieve the desired *Affekt*. James E. Jordan plays the glistening and ethereal organ part.

Moving over to the *Magnificat*, we find another approach. Pärt opts to concentrate on one pitch (C), creating an edifice based on the note and its overtones. If anything, the effect is even more meditative; come the *Nunc Dimittis* (presented as a separate piece), we move to a different flavor of stasis, modally based, out of which the solo soprano of Sister Amanda Ortoliani emerges, radiant and hopeful, leading to the choral luminosity of the final section.

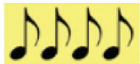
Finally in the playing order comes the *Stabat Mater*. It could be argued Pergolesi set the bar here and no-one has ever topped him; could it be that the act of composing this in honor of the centenary of the death of Alban Berg enables Pärt to ascend to Pergolesian heights? Certainly the cumulative effect and the music's dolorous tailing off into Pärt's cherished silence is analogous in its power. Three-part choir meets three-part strings, the latter linking the sections of the texts with infectious dance rhythms (superbly realized here) as well as underpinning the choral singing unforgettably; equally unforgettable are the moments when the choir is heard *a cappella*, or when the upper voices demonstrate an almost supernatural sense of control.

There is plenty of competition here, not least from Paul Hillier and the Theatre of Voices on Harmonia Mundi (*Fanfare* 36:2; his disc also includes *Peace Upon You, Jerusalem*). But as a disc of purely Pärt, this presents 70 minutes of exquisite spiritual power. The presentation is fine too: The extended booklet notes are exemplary in guiding both the reader-listener through Pärt's stylistic traits and the individual works themselves. **Colin Clarke**



## Meine Musik sagt, was ich zu sagen habe

02/05/2020



**Arvo Pärt: L'abbé Agathon + Magnificat + Nunc dimittis, Peace Upon You! Jerusalem + Salve Regina + Stabat Mater; Rachel McKendree, Sr. Amanda Ortolani, Sopran, Alexander Pugsley, Bariton, James E. Jordan, Orgel, Chor und Orchester Glorïae Dei Cantores, Richard K. Pugsley; 1 SACD Glorïae Dei Cantores GDCD065; Aufnahme 09/2018, Veröffentlichung 01/05/2020 (69'02) – Rezension von Uwe Krusch**



Obwohl kein Freund großer Worte und damit nicht mediengewandt, hat Arvo Pärt doch einen sehr exponierten Platz als Komponist ernster Musik erhalten. Das mag darin begründet sein, dass seine Werke immer von tiefen Gefühlen getragen werden. Verschiedene Chorwerke, teilweise mit solistischen Stimmen oder auch von Streichern oder Orgel begleitet, zeigen seine intensiv religiöse Stimme unter den zeitgenössischen Komponisten.

Die Sänger und Musiker von Glorïae Dei Cantores entwickeln den sich meist in ruhigen Bahnen strömenden Fluss der Musik mit Gestaltungsfeingefühl. Im Umfeld meist nur intellektuell sinnfreier

politischer Sabberlei tut es gut, auch einmal US-amerikanische Stimmen zu hören, die sich einer angemessenen Sinnvermittlung verschrieben haben und dazu adäquate Methoden einsetzen. So wird deutlich, dass die Botschaft der Musik von Arvo Pärt auch außerhalb des Umfeldes seiner estnischen Herkunft eine universelle Botschaft vermittelt.

Die Solisten ergänzen den Ansatz der Ensembles mit heraus-, aber nicht abgehobenen Beiträgen. Zusammen mit der keine Wünsche offen lassenden technischen Zubereitung gibt die im ensembleeigenen Label herausgebrachte Aufnahme einen gelungenen Eindruck dieser Chorwerke.

**Arvo Pärt is one of the best-known composers of serious music. This may be due to the fact that his works always carry deep feelings. On this CD various choral works, some with solo voices or accompanied by strings or organ, show this intense, religious voice among contemporary composers.**

**The singers and musicians of Glorïae Dei Cantores develop the flow of the music with a sense of creative sensitivity. In an environment of political gibberish that is usually intellectually meaningless, it is good to hear voices from the US that are committed to conveying meaning and that use appropriate methods to do so. Thus it becomes clear that Arvo Pärt's music conveys a universal message.**

**The soloists are totally convincing with contributions that stand out but are not detached. With a technical preparation that leaves nothing to be desired, the recording, released on the ensemble's own label, gives a successful impression of these choral works.**



## FOR OUR TIME AND FOR ALL TIMES - *TransCentury Communications*

*Arvo Pärt: Stabat Mater; Salve Regina; Magnificat; Nunc dimittis; Peace upon You, Jerusalem; L'abbé Agathon.* Gloriæ Dei Cantores conducted by Richard J. Pugsley. GDC Recordings. \$19.99 (SACD).

*American Psalmody, Volume 1: Music of Samuel Adler, Charles Ives, Alan Hovhaness, Daniel Pinkham, Ronald A. Nelson, Robert Starer, Howard Hanson, and Randall Thompson.* Gloriæ Dei Cantores conducted by Elizabeth C. Patterson. GDC Recordings. \$16.99.

“Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,” reads Matthew 6:34, which is to say there is no use worrying about tomorrow, since it will provide plenty of worries of its own. Yet it is well-nigh impossible now *not* to worry about tomorrow and, indeed, to worry that the worries tomorrow will bring will only extend and expand those of today...and then the next day will make things still worse...and on and on. A touch or two of the peace “which passeth all understanding” (Philippians 4:7) is very much to be wished for now - no matter what one’s individual religious or spiritual beliefs may be.

It is in times like these - and let us remember that there have been many earlier times filled with deep and justified fear, worry and uncertainty in terms both of health and of economic viability - that music, at least some music, can provide a combination of uplift and calm that can help counteract the frenetic thoughts and endlessly circulating worry and near-panic that pervade our lives today.

Yet one would not expect to find calming, uplifting music being written by contemporary composers: most are better known for dramatic, dissonant, intense music that is difficult to perform (and frequently difficult to listen to) than they are for anything remotely soothing. Arvo Pärt, however, is a notable, *very* notable, exception. The famed Estonian composer (born 1935) did go through a neo-Schoenbergian period early in his compositional life (and was rather imitative of Shostakovich and Prokofiev still earlier). But he concluded nearly half a century ago that those approaches were, for him, dead ends - and that he needed to return to the roots of much Western music, in the form of Gregorian chant, to find a new way forward. The result was a compositional technique that Pärt calls *tintinnabuli*, the word itself evoking bell sounds and minimalism - which pretty well describes how works created by Pärt using the technique come across to an audience.

Unlike other self-invented compositional approaches, though, Pärt’s does not require significant analysis or academic study to prepare listeners to experience it: whatever the technical specifics Pärt uses to create his chant-infused pieces, these are works that reach out to audiences’ emotions and provoke contemplative, uplifting and calming features that are intuitively understandable. All six works sung by the marvelous Gloriæ Dei Cantores choral group under Richard K. Pugsley on a new SACD from GDC Recordings speak beautifully to a modern audience - even one unfamiliar



with Latin, the language of most of these pieces, and equally unfamiliar with the specific religious connotations and purposes of the pieces. *Stabat Mater*, the longest work here, produces an immediate feeling of eternity through a two-and-a-half-minute introduction for strings before the chorus even enters - and weaves a 25-minute spell of resolution and resignation, of acceptance, in musical language that certainly fits the topic (the suffering of the Virgin Mary at Christ's Crucifixion) but that also ultimately proffers a message of hope. *Salve Regina* ("Hail, Queen"), directed at Mary, is declaimed, almost spoken, in Pärt's work, whose modest pulsing carries the music along in a series of small, gentle waves. *Magnificat* is praise *by* Mary, and Pärt invests it with an otherworldliness that requires a perfectly balanced chorus with clear enunciation in even the quietest passages - providing a fine example of just how good *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* is. *Nunc dimittis* specifically asks God to allow His servant to depart in peace, and here the sense of peacefulness is palpable throughout. *Peace upon You, Jerusalem* - which is actually placed first on the disc - is a somewhat brighter, more-upbeat work, one in which the higher registers of the female voices have a distinct bell-like quality that produces a lovely blending at the conclusion. And then there is the most-unusual piece here: *L'abbé Agathon*, for voices and eight cellos, or four violas and four cellos - a work that draws not on traditional liturgical texts but on the story of one man who showed the purity and totality of his love by being willing to exchange his body for that of a leper. Placed second on the disc - just before *Salve Regina* - it combines instrumental effectiveness (including some telling *pizzicato* material) with a French vocal narrative, both spoken and sung, that makes the story more multifaceted than are the words of the other works here, but no less heartfelt and uplifting. The simplicity and directness of the setting makes it almost liturgical and lets it fit neatly among the Latin material elsewhere on this recording - helping turn this release as a whole into an experience that is both calming and highly meaningful.

**-TransCentury Communications**

Review by Henry Fogel

**PÄRT** *Stabat Mater. Peace Upon You, Jerusalem. L'abbé Agathon. Salve Regina. Magnificat. Nunc dimittis* • Richard K. Pugsley, cond; Gloriæ Dei Cantores • GLORIÆ DEI CANTORES 065 (SACD: 69:02 [u](#))

Everything in this collection of music by Arvo Pärt has been recorded before, many of the works more than once. While I will not claim that in each case this is the finest performance available, I can say that every performance here is competitive.

By now most *Fanfare* readers know what to expect from this acclaimed and popular Estonian composer. Pärt's music moves slowly and often quietly. The booklet opens with a quote that is a helpful guide to understanding his aesthetic: "Music is my friend, ever-understanding. Compassionate. Forgiving, it's a comforter, the handkerchief for drying my tears of sadness, the source of my tears of joy. My liberation and flight. But also, a painful thorn in my flesh and soul, that which makes me sober and teaches humility."

*Peace upon You, Jerusalem* is a setting of Psalm 122 for women's voices. If you think of Pärt's music as being unvaryingly quiet and inward-looking, this work will change your mind. There is a wide variety of mood and color, and the music reflects the rejoicing of the pilgrims making their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. *L'abbé Agathon*, which follows, is actually a mini-drama—a musical depiction of the legend of an elderly abbot who is tested by a leper whom he comes across. A string ensemble joins the choir and provides rhythmic vigor and a broader color palette than is typical of Pärt. The score makes imaginative use of pizzicato techniques to expand and underline the drama of the abbot's encounter.

The remaining four works set standard liturgical texts. *Salve Regina* is performed in its original version for choir and organ. This is, to my ears, one of Pärt's masterpieces. It was composed in 2001 on commission from the cathedral in Essen, and made use of all of the church's choirs: children's, men's, women's, and mixed, which were placed in galleries throughout the church. I only listened to this recording in two-channel stereo, but even in that mode it created the impression of space intended by the composer. Pärt takes a very simple and beautiful melody, reminiscent of plainchant but in fact his own, and expands it gradually into eight parts in a stunning climax. *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis* are two exquisitely beautiful shorter pieces that serve as a bridge between *Salve Regina* and the major work on the disc, the 25-minute *Stabat Mater*.

There have been a number of recordings of *Stabat Mater*. This one stands near or at the top of the competitive pile. Although much of the music is marked by the typical inward-looking quietness we associate with Pärt, there are contrasting sections of great drama. Conductor Richard Pugsley and his choral and instrumental forces scale everything perfectly. The contrasts are jarring, as they were meant to be, but the overall shape of the score is not lost. This is music that presents the listener with both pain and consolation, and it is incumbent on the performers to figure out how to unite those contrasting elements. It is accomplished in large part by taking great care with transitions, whether they are transitions of tempo, color, or dynamics. The bridging from one mood to the other must be judicious and very thoughtfully handled.

There are many discs featuring Pärt's choral writing, as a glance at the *Fanfare* Archive will testify. This is one of the finest. Gloriæ Dei Cantores was founded in 1988 as the resident choir of the Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans, Massachusetts. Their intonation is impeccable, their blending of voices is complete, and their ability to produce ethereal pianissimos while maintaining tonal body is very special. Pugsley keeps a firm pulse on music that could, and sometimes does, lose its shape under less capable hands. The recorded sound finds the right balance between spaciousness and clarity, and James E. Jordan's notes are very informative. Finally, great praise to Gloriæ Dei Cantores for providing, on their own label, complete texts and translations. Recommended with enthusiasm. **Henry Fogel**



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## Stabat Mater

Gloriae Dei Cantores 065

Peace Upon You, Jerusalem/ L'Abbe Agathon/ Salve Regina/ Magnificat/ Nunc dimittis/ Stabat Mater 69:02

I have often said that it can be difficult to tell the difference between some contemporary composed classical music and some improvised music. So here is a completely composed piece under review.

Arvo Pärt, born in Estonia in 1935 is considered to be a minimalist composer along with people as John Adams, Phillip Glass, Terry Riley and others. Minimalism has various influences including music from Asia with its repetitions. Like all such composers, each brings a personal approach to the music within that overall genre. Today, Pärt is one of the most performed contemporary composers.

Stabat Mater is a form of prayer on the suffering of Mary. This recording includes other works that are related to the Stabat Mater. Part 1 begins with a section from psalm 122 about the ascent to Jerusalem. This section features two soprano soloists, accompanied by chorus and orchestra. The influence of Gregorian Chant can be heard throughout the whole work but is clearly heard in the choral accompaniment.

Then there is the story of L'abbe Agathon or Father Agathon, an old man who turned to the desert in order to understand Christ's life more fully. This section features soprano and baritone soloists, women's choir violi and celli.

Salve Regina is performed by choir and organ and uses what Part calls his "tintinnabull" technique of composing which is supposed to have specific effects on the ear of the listener related to tintinitis, or the hearing of the ringing of bells. The text is from an 11th century monk, Herman von Reichenau.

The Magnificat uses Pärt's technique coupled with more straightforward compositional techniques. This section is about Mary's response to the angels. This section features soprano soloist with full chorus.

Nunc dimittis is about St Simeon's song of witness. It uses space and silence with the full chorus and soprano solo. It uses various harmonic techniques moving from major to minor to modes.

And finally the main section, the Stabat Mater itself, the longest section of this recording. This piece was commissioned by the Alban berg foundation on the 100th anniversary of Berg's birth. The piece is about Mary's suffering watching Jesus die on the cross. It has tremendous emotional content.

Musically, like so many religious works, it can stand on its own as a concert work. It is a great work for lovers of choral music. The harmonies and structures of the piece can be listened to casually or with great seriousness. Like all great works, the more carefully one listens, the greater the rewards. And, as someone familiar with the work of Pärt, I can say this is an excellent performance.

In terms of recommendations to readers of Cadence, any one interested in composition or choral works, regardless of genre will surely enjoy this wonderful recording.

—Bernie Koenig