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Carl Rützi's Requiem



Carl Rützi's Requiem is a Naxos recording that caught many of us by surprise last year. It's rich and dark beauty somehow resonated with a few of us enough to make our best of 2009 lists. I decided to contact Carl and see if I could get him to speak about this fantastic piece of music.

1. Who is Carl Rützi?

I am a father of two sons - both pianists, too. I am also a grandfather of three children - two girls and a boy - who I look after regularly. My wife who I have been married to for nearly 37 years teaches languages at the local secondary school.

After taking my piano and organ concert diplomas in 1975 at the Zurich conservatoire, I was told by my piano teacher to go abroad for further studies.

My wife, having spent two summer holidays as an au-pair in a lovely London family, suggested we should both go to study in London. 1976 we had a great time in London, went often to South Bank and other concerts, discovered the extremely high quality of English choirs, eg. the Brompton Oratory Choir, the BBC Singers and many others. My piano professor Kendall Taylor introduced me to many celebrities at the Royal College of Music such as Richard Latham, who then became my organ teacher, Herbert Howells and Sir David Wilcocks (our truly most embarrassing experience was when Kendall Taylor spontaneously gave us his tickets - which we thought were ordinary student tickets - for an opera at the Royal College of Music; but they turned out to be two special seats next to Sir David Wilcocks: We were dressed in yellow sailing raincoats and wearing Wellington boots because it was so wet outside). Beside being a wonderful teacher, Kendall Taylor took us to Wales in his car (we climbed the Travan - three peaks in one day - together with this then 71 year old man), to the Lake District, to Leeds where he gave a recital although his fifth finger was badly hurt: He brilliantly rearranged all fingerings. His wife Mirjana worked at the BBC and took us to the Llangollen Folk Music Festival in Wales.

Full of all these musical and cultural impressions, I started composing. As there was an air stewardess living right above our studio in Chiswick and knocking when I practised the piano before 9 am (because she wanted to sleep), I used these first hours of the day by setting the Rilke poem Gebet into music. This became the start of a long chain of coincidences:

My best friend Peter Wullimann, the famous Swiss wood printer, asked me to set seven Rilke poems to music, and he illustrated the same poems as black and white wood prints. The Choir of Brompton Oratory recorded these seven motets Buch der Bilder for 10 parts a cappella 1978 and the disc came out in a bibliophile cassette together with the wood prints and the poems. The producer of this recording, Anthony Sargent, then became producer of the BBC singers, and one of the singers, Stephen Jackson, later became the chorus master of the BBC Symphony Chorus. Meanwhile the BBC singers had recorded the Rilke motets and asked for more music: The Missa Angelorum was

broadcast by the BBC and heard by Ian de Massini, conductor of Cambridge Voices. It was before the internet era which meant it took Stephen and Ian years to find me!

Since the beginning of the nineties, I have worked together very closely with the BBC Symphony Chorus, Cambridge Voices, the Cheltenham Bach Choir, the Wooburn Singers, Norwich Cathedral Choir, Escorial Choir and many others. Some of them recorded my music on CD which constantly enlarged the circle: I got commissions from Indianapolis (Paul Krasnovsky), St. Louis Chamber Choir (Philip Barnes) and finally from the Bach Choir (David Hill).

Beside writing choral music, I have written a number of instrumental works such as works for piano, for organ, for violin and organ, for harp, brass band, euphonium and wind orchestra, strings and, on top of all, a concerto for three pianos and orchestra dedicated to my wife, performed by our two sons and myself three times in 2006 and broadcast by Swiss Radio. It was great fun and I am looking forward to its next performance!

When studying in London, my aim was to become an accomplished pianist and organist, an interpreter of classical music - and I still love to play recitals and concerts! - but I would never have thought it would be the start of such a wonderful and incredible series of lucky chances which made my own music spread all over the world (such as I wonder as I wander from King's College Chapel Cambridge on Christmas Eve) and, as a climax, now my Requiem as an internationally distributed Naxos CD (published by Novello).

2. How did this recording / composition come about?

A member of Cambridge Voices, Tim Lewers, also a member of the Bach Choir, introduced me to David Hill. David commissioned a work for choir and orchestra suggesting I write a Requiem - using more or less the same forces as in the Fauré Requiem - aware of the fact that this means a huge challenge for any composer.

3. What inspires you and your work?

When I first heard an English choir sing so purely, I thought it was like a piano of human voices. This inspired me to experiment at the piano with this medium, having choirs in mind. (A climax of these experiments surely was my motet for 40 parts Veni Creator Spiritus written for Cambridge Voices to go with Tallis' Spem in Alium.)

I also find inspiration by walking in the countryside and by watching paintings. I can never force an inspiration to happen, and therefore have to trust in my faith: I find the Bible a rich source of inspiration.

4. Do you have other recording projects in the works?

Last year, I played and recorded my entire organ work on a huge five keyboard organ in Lucerne which has been released on the Guild Label. A CD with a very famous Alpenhorn player playing my newer Alpenhorn music will come out next summer.

5. How has your Requiem been received in other territories?

All the reviews I have found in the internet are very good. They are collected on the Bach Choir's homepage, on the Chester Novello website and on my own.

In the live performances, the audience has always given long standing ovations (in Winchester Cathedral, Douai Abbey, Aarau and Oberägeri / Switzerland). The US first performance took place in January 2009 in Louisville / Kentucky. The world premiere of the organ version will take place in Lucerne in November 2010 with the Lucerne Händel Choir and the Ukraine chamber choir Cantus. The CD has a strong impact, because it is so wonderfully sung and played. A live performance, however, with the solo soprano starting to sing at the back of the church and walking slowly towards the two choirs in the front can even increase the impact of the music.