

CD review: “Polyphonics” (Boston Early Music News, Volume XV, No.4)

Zorgina

Ohmibus Records OH2000-15, 1996

Have you ever walked up to the ticket counter at a bus terminal and said “One ticket to anywhere, please?” Neither have I. That’s because I prefer to know where I am and where I’m going before forking over hard-won cash and hopping onto a bus or train - call me old-fashioned. Perhaps that’s also why I almost universally dislike survey or compilation/sampler CD’s of early music where you get Ockeghem, Dowland, Perotin, Bach and perhaps even Schubert on the same disc; like the “Beyond Chant” series and all those “best of” CD’s by everyone from The Hilliard Ensemble to Anonymous 4. No thank you.

Therefore, when I first picked up “Polyphonics” and read the subtitle (“a cappella interpretations of medieval and Renaissance polyphony”) I was immediately skeptical. My skepticism increased while reading the introductory liner notes, which explain that **Zorgina** is comprised of three women from three countries and two continents, have performance backgrounds and academic degrees in jazz, pop, folk, contemporary, classical, avantgarde music, and law (!?), and use “dance and theatre as the fundamental basis for our interpretations of early music.” “Hmm,” I thought to myself, “these people sound as meandering and unfocused as the repertoire on their CD.”

And wander the CD does. In under 47 minutes (on the short side by today’s standards) we hear pieces from Codex Calixtinus, Las Huelgas Manuscript, Montpellier Manuscript, motets by Machaut and Solage, 16th century madrigals by John Wilbye and Domenico da Nola, 15th century German songs from the Lochamer Liederbuch, and a Macedonian folk song! After two listenings I had condemned **Zorgina** to the shelf of nice-but-extremely-low-rotation-CD’s in my collection.

Then something happened. I put the CD back in my player a couple of days later, and found myself unexpectedly enjoying the ride for what it was. Suddenly I reveled in the stylistic diversity, the changes in texture and harmony, the contrast of languages. Not as a cheezy “chronological tour through the ages,” but as real pieces of music. And unlike many trendy groups **Zorgina** can sing: their intonation is excellent, and they bring a musical expressiveness to this music lacking in big-name groups such as Gothic Voices and Anon 4. Even the production is nice, avoiding the temptation of submerging everything in a sea of reverberation as is the recent trend.

The disk does have some drawbacks. First of all, **Zorgina** faces two serious dilemmas that every all-female vocal ensemble faces: range and repertoire. In an attempt to solve the latter, they explain that “we have chosen songs where women are the subject of the texts, or where the text is written from a women’s point of view... Although we don’t know of any female composers of medieval polyphony, a great deal of this music was written by ‘anonymous,’ and there is ample evidence that women did perform this repertoire...as in the convents of Las Huelgas.” Strange then, that of the 15 pieces only *two* have texts which could be seen as a women’s point of view, and only five have texts that mention women at all! And though undoubtedly nuns did sing chant, it is rather dubious to insinuate that any of these works were penned by a “Ms. Anonymous,” and even more far-fetched that nuns would have sung courtly love madrigals. **Zorgina** explicitly state that they are “interested in women in musical history,” but do not include a single work by any of the more than two dozen medieval and Renaissance women composers we *do* know of. They would have better off avoiding this topic altogether and letting their choice of repertoire stand on its own (which it ultimately does), rather than attempting to defend their selections in one paragraph of “scholarship-lite.”

Range presents particular challenges for women ensembles. Ironically, chant pieces are less difficult as one can simply sing them up an octave. However, aside from some Ferrarese repertoire there is very little music written for SSA voices during the 14th through 16th centuries. As a result they have to transpose most pieces, and in several cases resort to fudging the counterpoint (hence the “arrangements by **Zorgina**” credit on the CD). Aside from being a personal pet peeve, this practice is decidedly un-HIP

and destroys the integrity of the original lines and counterpoint. This is a predicament with no easy solution, and may ultimately thin out the current plethora of all-women ensembles after the novelty wears off; at least in terms of the HIP community.

That said, almost all the pieces on this CD are performed extremely well both from a technical and musical viewpoint. Particular nice are the works from the Lochamer Liederbuch and the Montpellier Manuscript, which couldn't be more stylistically opposite. The single exception is Solage's elusive and twisting "Fumeux Fume," which receives rather poor treatment. I'm not sure what they were smoking when they recorded this track, but it has the energy level of an opium den and the tempo of a funeral dirge.

Despite the flaws, all in all "Polyphonics" is an engaging and promising debut, and it will be interesting to see whether **Zorgina** chooses to continue this rambling path - a difficult task to successfully pull off twice - or to focus on a specific repertoire. For those who get the Jack Kerouac itch from time to time, "Polyphonics" provides a superb soundtrack while you're "On the Medieval Road," and some quality listening when back at home.

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