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CD Review by J. F. Weber

VICTORIA *Officium Hebdomadae sanctae* • Josep Cabré, dir; La Colombina; Juan Carlos Asensio, dir; Schola Antiqua • GLOSSA GCD 922002 (3 CDs: 198:24)

This is the sixth comprehensive approach to Tomás Luis de Victoria's massive collection of music for Holy Week, published in 1585 as the composer was leaving Rome after 20 years there. The *Officium Defunctorum* of 1605, his final work, is the only rival work to be considered as his greatest masterpiece. But while we have had many sets of the 18 responsories for Tenebrae and almost as many sets of the nine lamentations, the most familiar elements of the Holy Week volume, the other pieces of this collection have been recorded more fitfully, and the two Passions (St. Matthew for Palm Sunday and St. John for Good Friday) have had the least attention of all. Of the six sets that included all the lamentations and responsories, the first came from Silos in 1973 (MHS 3209/10/11; no CD) with the addition of four of the motets and a complete St. John Passion. In 1978 Stéphane Caillat (Arion ARN 336016; no CD) added a chant responsory after each lamentation, but no other pieces. Then there was an expansive five-LP set from Spanish Columbia in 1981 (8:1; no CD) with eight motets, an extra *O vos omnes* from 1572, and abridged versions of both Passions (the five LPs were sung entirely by solo voices, with the entire *Officium Defunctorum* as a bonus). Then the Montserrat choir in 1986 (DHM/EMI 1C 157-16 9572 3, 10:2; no CD) included four of the motets and the earlier *O vos omnes*. Most recently, on Champeaux CSM 0001 (Jade C 332), recorded in 1991, Jean-Paul Gipon gave us the eight motets and a complete St. John Passion, the only set that presented the Improperia ("Popule meus") with all the chant verses and, like Silos, added cantillation, or simple chant tones, of the 18 lessons of the second and third nocturns.

This time the Improperia are not as complete as Gipon's set (like Silos, this set includes only some of the chant verses), and both Passions are abridged.

Uniquely among all these sets, we hear a chant antiphon and a versicle at the beginning of each of the nine nocturns, and a few other very familiar chant antiphons from the services. Cabré directs the polyphony, while Asensio directs the chant segments, using Roman books of 1586/87 and a 1515 book from Toledo for the two Spanish chants. Both have proved their expertise and scholarship in previous recordings of polyphony and chant, respectively. The recording was made at San Miguel in Cuenca during three concerts of the Festival of Sacred Music in 2004 (see 27:1 for a report on the previous year's festival). This makes it easier to understand why the two Passions, which consist of the crowd's exclamations, set to polyphony within the traditional cantillation of the Passion narrative, were abridged. Long stretches of cantillation that are not interrupted by the crowd were ripe for omission, but what was left still showed well enough how the polyphony fit into the narration. I would have liked the complete *Improperia* as Gipon alone gave us, but that was not done.

Still, this superb set now ranks at the top of the competition. The vocal ensemble is preferable to the solo voices on Spanish Columbia, and their singing is superior to Gipon's group, the only other version on CD. Asensio directs the chant with attention to the variant version that was used at the time as well as to semiological interpretation, all done with an attractively unaffected style of singing. Cabré, who has sung in many early-music ensembles for years, is a capable director of the eight-voice ensemble (two of his recordings of Salazar's music with another ensemble have just appeared). The sound captured in the former church is ideal, warm without being overly resonant. The presentation is attractive, a slipcase containing three thin jewel boxes and a 64-page booklet that includes two notes. Do not overlook this magnificent achievement. **J. F. Weber**

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