

BUXTEHUDE *Membra Jesu Nostri* DAYER *Afin que le lion feroce*

Author: Fabrice Fitch

Gli Angeli team up with members of the specialist contemporary ensemble Contrechamps in an 'old and new' pairing that pits Buxtehude's best-known work against a piece composed as a companion to it. Written in response to a sudden bereavement, Xavier Dayer's *Afin que le lion féroce ne l'attaque pas* may best be described as a secular cantata, albeit with a choir consisting of five soloists and no arias as such (but plenty of interventions by smaller groups within it). Lasting just over half an hour and programmed to bisect Buxtehude's cantata cycle, it uses the five viols as reflective witnesses (they almost function as the choir in a Baroque cantata) to the more dynamic writing for modern wind and string quintets. As protagonists in the work, the winds rival the voices at times, particularly the powerfully evocative bassoon. Dayer's idiom here (basically atonal but with occasional nods to diatonicism and local pitch centres, especially near the end) stays within fairly corseted expressive bounds, as though daring grief to spill out. (How satisfying that aesthetic gambit proves will depend on your point of view.) Gli Angeli show admirable commitment, rarely seeming stretched by the considerable vocal and ensemble demands made of them over the course of the work, which unfolds without a break.

Inflected perhaps by Dayer's approach to his own work, Gli Angeli have opted for a similarly contemplative stance in the Buxtehude, which is perhaps marginally the less rounded performance: the most expressive, madrigalian passages (the exclamations 'Quid sunt plagae istae' from 'Ad manus' and 'Vulnerasti cor meum' from 'Ad cor') don't quite attain the pitch of intensity that the music might elicit. (The text of the latter passage quotes from the Song of Songs, which Dayer also uses – one of the few direct references to Buxtehude.) But this account would still hold its own in a crowded discographic field, thanks to some very expressive singing and a coherent ensemble (taking voices and instruments together). Stephan MacLeod's remarkable turn as singer-director yields one of the more effective 'old/new' pairings that I've heard in recent years.

