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Review of *Poulenc: Messe en Sol, Litanies a la Vierge noire, Motets* Choeur de Chambre Accentus Laurence Equilbey, conductor 1997 Accord

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performer has a small chamber choir and superb vocal performance.

There is just so much to love about this recording. The group of voices led by the excellent Laurence Equilbey performs beautifully. One can only describe the music as sublime, beautiful, and great. There is an air of reverence and awe about the music. The vocal lines are beautiful, light, and clear. The instrumental parts are also very well done. The recording is of high quality and the sound is excellent. The music is beautiful and the performance is superb. The recording is of high quality and the sound is excellent. The music is beautiful and the performance is superb.

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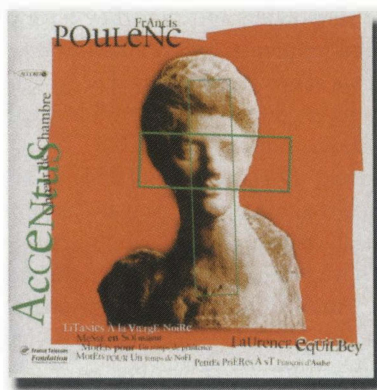
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Francis Poulenc
Messe en Sol



Poulenc: Messe en Sol, Litanies à la Vierge noire, Motets Choeur de Chambre Accentus Laurence Equilbey, conductor 1997 Accord 464 289-2; 72'50"

When conductor Laurence Equilbey established the Accentus Chamber Choir in 1991, she and the group set out to perform unaccompanied repertoire of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this recording of Francis Poulenc's sacred works from 1936 to 1953, one detects a decision well served. Equilbey and the group approach Poulenc's repertoire with a deep understanding of the period, the composer's spirituality and its effect on his creative psyche, and his obvious debts to Stravinsky, Fauré, and early Catholic traditions. Poulenc's intensely spiritual sacred works are not easy to reconcile with his earlier secular and more satirical offerings, but Equilbey and Accentus do so with stunningly beautiful results.

The choir is outstanding – a perfect blend of voices. Even in the most exposed passages, such as the beginning of the

Mass, diction, intonation and ensemble are impeccable. Indeed, one is so enchanted by the interpretation of the works and sheer beauty of the choir that such fundamental technical issues recede from view. Equilbey draws the listener's attention to the heart of the work and away from the mechanics of performance. The strength and exquisiteness of this recording lie in Equilbey's interpretation of the repertoire and in the choir's execution of it. She is neither heavy handed nor rigid in her handling of phrasing, dynamics, or tone, but is clearly exacting. The results sound instinctive, rather than dictated or forced, and are never strident. There is a quiet energy about these renditions that captures the very essence of this side of Poulenc.

Incredibly beautiful moments may be heard throughout the disc, but this reviewer was particularly taken with the *Messe en Sol majeur*. This work, written in 1937, highlights the dichotomy of Poulenc's compositional style. Poulenc had undergone a religious conversion after a pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Rocamadour, precipitated by the death of a dear friend. Clearly, he wanted to express his burgeoning devotion to the Catholic Church, but was struggling for just the right language. His first work following the pilgrimage, the *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*, owe much to chant. The Mass, however, shows Poulenc experimenting with his newfound sacred language alongside his earlier practices. Some of the elements from his secular works, notably the charged dissonances and Stravinskian rhythmic passages, are pitted against a spirituality that shows itself in both chant-like sections and Fauré-inspired "sound baths" during which the soprano voices float high above the ensemble. Poulenc uses these languages in a journey of sorts that begins with the dissonances of the "Kyrie" and ends with the ethereal "Agnus Dei." The Mass text is faithfully rendered, but with a 1930s sensibility that Equilbey and Accentus portray beautifully. Where the music is glorious, Equilbey lets it soar. Where it is still and quiet, she allows it be as meditative as the chorus can manage without losing energy. Where the music is dissonant or rhythmic and borders on the satirical, as in the "Sanctus", she finds a newfound spirituality, rather than cynicism. Thus, the old is made new.

The performances of the *Quatre petites*

pri res de Saint-Fran ois d'Assise (1948) and the *Quatre motets pour un temps de penitence* (1939) also stand out. Though the liner notes describe the former as being “in a popular, weightless style,” *Accentus* offers moments of quiet beauty. The latter, written as Europe was on the precipice of World War II, is haunting. Each work is given such careful attention and thoughtful interpretation as to be mesmerizing. The only complaint this reviewer has is with the liner notes. While entertaining and informative, they are somewhat overstated in their description of the music, being aimed more at an amateur listener than at the enthusiast. This, however, does not detract from the overall view that this recording should be part of everyone’s library.

Vicki Stroehrer
Huntington, West Virginia



Requiem by Pascal Dusapin, performed by the Chamber Choir of the University of Toronto, conducted by David Lang. Nonesuch Records, Nonesuch 7559-7559-2, 2007, 100 minutes, \$29.98.

The *Requiem* by Pascal Dusapin is a haunting and beautiful work that explores the boundaries of the genre. The music is characterized by its delicate textures and intricate harmonies, creating a sense of profound mystery and emotional depth. The performance by the Chamber Choir of the University of Toronto, under the direction of David Lang, is exceptional, capturing the subtle nuances of the score with precision and sensitivity. The recording is a masterpiece of contemporary choral music, offering a unique and powerful experience to listeners.

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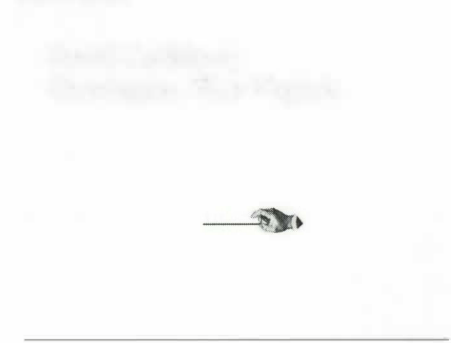
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