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Review of Harry Christophers and The Sixteen, *La Jeune France*

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): La Jeune France : Épithalame; Cinq Rechants; Le Cantique des Cantiques
The Sixteen by Jolivet, Messiaen, Daniel-Lesur and Harry Christophers

Review by: Vicki Stroeher

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La Jeune France
Jolivet: Épithalame; Messiaen:
Cinq Rechants;
Daniel-Lesur: Le Cantique des
Cantiques
The Sixteen
Harry Christophers, conductor
2004 Coro: COR 16023 60:01

Harry Christophers and The Sixteen (which, on this disc, numbers from twelve to twenty-four singers) have assembled an exciting recording of rather unusual repertoire: that of the group of composers known as La Jeune France. Although these works may not speak aesthetically to everyone, the performances certainly will. The group's tuning is impeccable and their diction clear, even when the composer deliberately obscures the text. Christophers' interpretations are neither heavy-handed nor overly controlled, even as the chorus's expression ranges from the primitive and aggressive to the quiet and mystical.

Yves Baudrier's manifesto for La Jeune France speaks of creating music that "stand[s] apart from academic or revolu-

tionary clichés," calling instead for works that surpass the impersonal life with spiritual excitement. These offerings by aesthetically like-minded composers—André Jolivet, Olivier Messiaen, and Jean Yves Daniel-LeSur—are intensely personal and are infused with a spirituality rooted in Eastern sensibilities, exoticism, eroticism and sensuality. They are unified by a reliance on the exotic and draw upon text sources from Egypt and India, Sanskrit, the Peruvian Indians and those problematic sacred texts, the Song of Songs. The first two works may prompt a certain intellectual distancing among some listeners, but there is a humanness about them that reveals something intensely personal. All three works invite us into the private worlds of the lovers.

André Jolivet drew from his love of African rhythms and Asian ritual and incantation to write *Épithalame*, which was an anniversary gift to his wife. Jolivet's love of the exotic finds expression in the raw and primitive, as the individual parts imitate a crowd in part one and as a sensual love song in part two, marked by descending chromatic scales and bell-like dissonances.

Olivier Messiaen's surrealist *Cinq Rechants* is the last of a set of three works inspired by the legend of Tristan and Isolde. The work presents an unusual side of spirituality, meditative yet sometimes sinister, as in the second movement, with its sinewy melodies unfolding over Tibetan Buddhist-like low chanting. These works are emotionally and structurally difficult for the listener, due to the sound-color presentation of the text, the onomatopoeic noises, and the fluidity be-

tween the French, Sanskrit and Quechua languages. The text of the third movement, in particular, is reminiscent of the psychological breakdown that occurs in Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, but set here to a hauntingly austere and beautiful choral chant.

Daniel-LeSur's emotive *Le Cantique de Cantiques* provides a pleasant contrast to the intellectual approaches of Jolivet and Messiaen. Beautiful in a way the other works are not, this erotic work begins with twentieth-century treatment of florid organum. The composition is intensely personal, thanks to both Daniel-LeSur's careful setting of the text and to the pure modal sounds and dissonances through which he creates an exotic sensuality. The text reflects the private poetry between a lover and his beloved. Time seems to stand still in the magical second song at the central phrase "My beloved is mine and I am his." The singers blossom in the joy of this manner of expression.

The music requires facility and virtuosic vocal technique, yet to rely solely on this would be an injustice to these composers. Each performer must own the text and sounds personally—particularly in the Messiaen—so that the performance will not come across as impersonal or ridiculous. Harry Christophers and The Sixteen accomplish this ably. They capture the raw primitiveness of Jolivet, the "sound bath" of Messiaen, and the rich sensuality of Daniel-LeSur. Choral aficionados will find the virtuosic performances exhilarating, but ultimately, the greatest delights of this intriguing recording will be for true twentieth-century aesthetes.

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