

musica Dei donum

CD reviews : Blasius Amon - Sacred Works

Few performers have such a thorough knowledge of renaissance polyphony as Paul Van Nevel. This is demonstrated time and again when he performs music by composers only specialists may have heard of. Blasius Amon (also spelled as Ammon) is a case in point. The disc that is the subject of this review is the live recording of a performance that took place on 26 August 2024 in Antwerp as part of the annual Laus Polyphoniae festival. It was covered on Youtube, and that was my first acquaintance with Amon. To my surprise his name turned up in a recording that I have reviewed very recently, as part of a programme devoted to music that was or may have been sung in monasteries in southern Germany in the late 16th century ("A monk's life"). That is an indication of where Amon was active.

Amon was born around 1560 in Hall, near Innsbruck. In 1568 he was accepted into the chapel of Archduke Ferdinand II, when Alexander Utendal was court composer and vice-Kapellmeister. The chapel was large for that time's standard, with up to 32 singers. It was one of the most important musical establishments in the German-speaking part of Europe. Among Amon's peers was Jacob Regnart. Until 1577 Amon sang there as a soprano; when his voice had broken, he left the chapel.

Apparently the Archduke held Amon in high esteem. In 1577 he granted him an annual scholarship for three years. In that same year Amon had expressed the wish to enter the Franciscan Order. Van Nevel, in his liner-notes, offers this explanation: "From 1574, the Innsbrucker Zum heiligen Kreuz Kloster (Innsbruck Monastery of the Holy Cross) was inhabited by German-speaking Franciscans, including the priest Valentin Frick, who was appointed preacher to the Habsburg court church in 1576. Amon forged a close friendship with Frick that would last until 1589, when Frick came into irreversible conflict with Archduke Ferdinand II. Amon's friendship with Frick was a significant factor in his decision not to choose a secular career as a court composer or Kapellmeister, but rather a musical career in monasteries and abbeys."

From 1577 to 1582 he studied at various monasteries (among them Zwettl and Brixen im Thale), and at the same time he was active as a composer, producing a surprisingly large corpus of sacred music. His first collection of music was published in 1582 in Vienna, including 41 motets for five voices. From 1582 to 1585 Amon was in Venice, where he had the opportunity to become acquainted with the latest trends in the composition of sacred music, which had a lasting effect on his development as a composer, which is demonstrated at the present disc.

After his return to Austria he was appointed Kapellmeister, composer and teacher of the choristers at Heiligenkreuz Abbey in Vienna, a post he held until his death at the age of only 30 years. His early death makes the size of his oeuvre all the more remarkable. And given the number of printed editions (five) and their size (and to that has to be added one lost collection and many motets included in anthologies) it is hard to understand why it has attracted so little attention.

Van Nevel entitled his liner-notes "The polyphonic balancing act of Blasius Amon". This refers to the stylistic differences in his oeuvre which in this recording is demonstrated through the juxtaposition of his Requiem and five motets.

Van Nevel, having pointed out Amon's large production, explains: "[There] is another unusual feature of Amon's compositions, namely the 'balancing act' between the Franco-Flemish style of polyphony on the one hand, and Venetian innovations (polyphony, predominance of warm harmonic chords, 'modern' tonality instead of church modes) on the other. It is also noteworthy that this balancing act

is not always chronological in the evolution of Amon's works. From 1583 onwards, the two sides of this polyphonic balancing act alternate unpredictably, even within the same composition."

The *Missa quatuor vocum pro defunctis* is a specimen of the Franco-Flemish side of Amon. It is dominated by four-part harmony, imitation and cantus firmus technique. In some sections plainchant is quoted in the upper voice in long note values.

The motets are taken from a collection of thirty sacred works for four to eight voices, which was printed in Munich in 1590 and dedicated to Amon's former patron Archduke Ferdinand II. Some of them, a number of which intended for one of the feasts in the ecclesiastical year, show the influence of the Venetian style. The latter comes most clearly to the fore in *Domine quid multiplicati sunt*, in which groups of voices alternate, whereas verses from the penitential Psalm 50 (51), *Miserere mei Deus*, are set in the style of the Franco-Flemish school. In *Magi videntes stellam* the two styles come together in one piece.

In these motets we also find a connection between text and music which reflects the fashion in Italy, partly under the influence of the madrigals that were written at the time. In *Magi videntes stellam*, a motet for Epiphany, the high voices are mostly dominating. In contrast, in *Tenebrae factae sunt*, one of the Responsories for Holy Week, the lower voices have the strongest presence, which gives this piece an appropriate dark colour. In *Domine quid multiplicati sunt* there are several moments with a marked connection between text and music. It is not absent in *Miserere mei Deus* either, for instance in some harmonic tension.

The playing time of this disc is rather short, which is disappointing considering the size of Amon's oeuvre. However, nobody seriously interested in renaissance polyphony should use that as an excuse not to add it to his collection. The music is of excellent quality and the performances could not be better. Van Nevel's interpretation is as differentiated as one would wish. In the Requiem the Offertory is sung in a modest tempo and a quiet manner, in accordance with the text. The ensuing Sanctus and Benedictus is much more extroverted and joyful, again reflecting their content. In the same way, the character of each motet is perfectly conveyed in the way it is sung, for instance with regard to tempo and dynamics.

Taking into account that this is a live recording, the quality of these performances is even more impressive. Paul Van Nevel and his singers have done us a great favour by bringing this fine music to our attention. It is to be hoped that it may encourage other ensembles to delve into the treasures that Amon has left.

Johan van Veen (© 2025)

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