

Liszt & Reubke

Organ Works played by Robert Costin at Wellington Town Hall Organ

Atoll ACD 307

This, Robert Costin's 3rd CD, is a coupling of virtuoso works played on one of New Zealand's major heritage instruments. Robert returns to the 1906 Norman & Beard on which he recorded his first CD in 2003 but this time, rather than a selection of organ favourites, he has focussed on two major symphonic works from the romantic repertoire.

By the 1850s Liszt had largely retired from his early career as a piano recitalist and was based in Weimar where he was encouraged to take an interest in organ composition and performance. The work recorded here, his '*Ad Nos, ad salutarem undam*', was commissioned for the dedication of a rebuilt organ encapsulating the growing romantic principles, at Merseberg Cathedral. The work, which evolved into the final form after some revisions of previous works, was based on a melody from Meyerbeer's opera *Le Prophète* which Liszt developed into a symphonic poem, clearly with orchestral resources and colouring in mind to exploit the resources of the rebuilt organ. Liszt's technical keyboard mastery is reflected in passages of dazzling complexity throughout the work.

Julius Reubke, the son of an organ builder, became a favoured pupil of Liszt in the Weimar years after attending the Berlin Conservatory. His unfortunately early death from tuberculosis was deeply regretted by Liszt and has robbed us of what should surely have been exceptional music. Only two works survive in the repertoire, a piano sonata and the work recorded here – his organ sonata '*On the 94th Psalm*' which Reubke himself played at Merseberg Cathedral. The single movement work comprises a linked series of programmatic reflections on selected verses of the psalm and, like Liszt's *Ad nos*, is very symphonic in style with extended sections of great technical brilliance.

The symphonic character of both these works make the Wellington Town Hall organ an excellent choice, with its wealth of English romantic symphonic colours. However, the limited combination system poses some problems in fully exploiting this tonal resource, and I note that both Douglas Mews and Richard Prothero were engaged as page turners and assistants. Roy Tankersley also assisted with some last minute reed tuning. The recording captures the range of tonal colours and the dynamics effectively, yet is sufficiently distant in perspective to allow a feeling of the hall environment to be conveyed and the frequency range has adequately recorded the profundity of bass notes.

Robert Costin's performances of these works are very good, with tempi well chosen to display the immensely athletic nature of fast moving sections. Phrasing and articulation is well thought through and the gentler, more reflective, quiet passages are taken at very apt paces in order to allow the development of tonal colour to be appreciated.

This coupling of Liszt and Reubke inevitably brings to mind the similar coupling in the 1985 DGG recording by Simon Preston at Westminster Abbey and leads me to make some comparisons. Preston's recording luxuriates in the more extreme cathedral-style tonal colours of the Abbey instrument with the use of high pressure reeds and forward, almost neo-baroque, choruses caught in a relatively close recording. Robert's CD is less extreme in this regard and, while the 1906 Norman & Beard may not precisely mirror the 1850 Merseberg instrument, I am left feeling that it produces sonorities which are none-the-less closer to that period. The other issue is Preston's extreme technical brilliance has led to a recording in which some dazzling virtuosic passages are taken notably faster in comparison with Robert's. This can become a situation where the music is not necessarily best served by speed, since this can impede our ability to appreciate the complexity of harmonic development and subtleties of phrasing and rhythm. There are differences between these two recordings, but in my view, Robert's registrations and interpretation are no less valid nor less appropriate and can even work better for this repertoire.

The CD is packaged with an attractive booklet with well-researched and informative notes written by Robert Costin. A brief history of the organ and specifications are included.

In conclusion, I find this to be an excellent CD and I thoroughly commend it as a fine example of massive organ repertoire played very convincingly on one of the jewels in New Zealand's crown of superb heritage organs. Robert Costin, Wayne Laird of Atoll and other contributors are to be congratulated for this.

Peter Stockwell

Assistant Organist, Knox Church, Dunedin &

Chairman, Dunedin Town Hall Organ Trust.