

Vox Luminis Review
October 15, 2018

By Morgan Lueth

Complementing the Tallis Scholars' superb choral bookend to the concert season last spring, the 2018/19 season of ECMS concerts opened with an impactful performance courtesy of renowned Belgian chamber choir Vox Luminis. Like the Tallis Scholars before, Vox Luminis' program offered another terrific survey of some ancient repertoire that doesn't enjoy the popularity that it quite clearly ought to. This ensemble expertly presented works on the theme of remembrance by Schütz, Morley and Purcell with their signature clarity and full sound that has brought them such international critical acclaim.

The profoundly moving *Musikalische Exequien* (1636) of Heinrich Schütz opened the evening and was the largest single work that Vox Luminis presented. Squarely embedded during the Lutheran Reformation this, Schütz's most famous funerary music, was composed hurriedly so as to be finished in time for the funeral services of a local nobleman friend who'd specifically commissioned Schütz to supply music for the event, prior to his death. With texts selected by the deceased that included passages from Scripture, as well as 16th evangelical writers including Luther, the *Musikalische Exequien* is also the first requiem written in the German language. Divided into three uneven parts, the first and largest, a movement "in the form of a German funeral mass" contains some of the most imposing and profound music of the entire work. Though written for the modest forces of choir six to eight voices, a basso continuo (typically a violin or cello) and organ, the path to the titanic oratorios of J.S. Bach some 85 years later is already clear here. Vocal lines in Schütz's requiem already strive for the expressivity and textual acuteness that finds fulfillment in the character arias of Bach's passions for Easter. Employing compositional techniques that he's thought to have learned in Venice as a student of Gabrieli, the *Musikalische Exequien*, Schütz's striking use of polyphonic dissonance in contrast with an undeniable tonal pull plants the work with one stylistic foot firmly in the late Renaissance, and the other at the genesis of the Baroque. Vox Luminis brought this early masterpiece to life with terrific vocal sensibility and musicianship as well as an interesting use of the concert space itself, the ensemble breaking up at times to sing their parts from different areas of the church.

Following an intermission after the Schütz requiem, which effectively marked the highpoint in German music before Bach, Vox Luminis then presented the pinnacle of the English tradition before Elgar, the music of Henry Purcell. His *Funeral Sentences and Full Anthems* explored striking textural contrasts through a synthesis of the "full" and "verse" styles of choral anthem and expressed a penetrating somberness through Purcell's innovative use of chromatic harmonies. Written on the seismic occasion of the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, Thomas Morley's *Music for the Funeral of Queen Elizabeth* brought the evening's program back to the late strains of the English Renaissance and conveyed the intense period of national mourning into which that country was plunged. Popular in their day, Morley's "Dirge Anthems" were choice accompaniment for state funerals to follow and were intended to punctuate moments in the funeral rite itself, covering the mourner's entrance into the churchyard, reflection at the graveside, and the casting of earth into the grave. With Vox Luminis' powerful performance of funeral sentence *O Dive Custos*, the evening was brought to a reflective and deeply moving close. The singers were warmly applauded, and the audience was rewarded with an encore.

The theme of remembrance that characterized this concert was made all-the-more poignant for the Edmonton Chamber Music Society supporters and volunteers considering the sudden passing of our

president, Karen Fingas, a little over a week prior. While the music featured on this program was, itself, written to memorialize people far removed from our own time and place, the basic sentiment of these works translated to the current sad circumstances beautifully. Vox Luminis' concert was one that Karen would have loved, and the experience certainly impactful for those of us who got the chance to work with her, knowing that we had the privilege of enjoying and appreciating such terrific art in her memory. She will be missed and fondly remembered by her friends and colleagues from the ECMS.