

ER HEIßET WUNDERBAR! • Alfredo Bernardini, dir; Berit Norbakken Solset (sop); Marianne Beate Kielland (mez); Anders J. Dahlin (ten); Halvor F. Melien (bar); Cecilia Bernardini (vn); Barokkanerne (period instruments) • LAWO 1169 (67:38)

BACH *Schwingt freudig euch empor*, BWV 36. **Christmas Oratorio: Bereite dich, Zion.** **FASCH** *Er heisset Wunderbar, Rat, Kraft, Held.* **GRAUPNER** *Der Herr wird König sein.* **TELEMANN** *Concerto in e*

When the German composer and polymath Johann Kuhnau died in June of 1722, the town council of Leipzig began a search to replace him as Kantor of the Church of St. Thomas. Fasch, Graupner, Telemann, and Bach were all candidates for the post. For various reasons the first three were unavailable, so Bach got the job. The town council's comment on the choice has lived in infamy: "When we cannot select from among the best, we must choose mediocrity." At that time Bach was much better known as a performer than as a composer, and unlike his fellow contenders, the music he wrote was not considered fashionable or modern. Of course, history has reversed the verdict: Bach is now supreme, although Telemann's stock has risen, and Graupner and Fasch are somewhat less obscure now thanks to the efforts of the early music movement.



The Leipzig episode would seem to make rivals of these four composers, yet here they are fraternizing on a single program—equanimity they perhaps never experienced while living. The cantatas by Fasch, Graupner, and Bach featured here were destined for Advent or Christmas and are appropriately festive, with texts that center on Christ's coming and kingship. In between we get a palate cleanser of a Telemann triple concerto. (I wonder why one of his cantatas was not also included?) This is scored for two oboes, violin, and strings, has two busy, agitated fast movements surrounding a lyrical slow one, and ends with a fourth, minuet movement. Unfortunately, it is a rather routine production.

Bach's cantata (whose title translates roughly as "Soar joyfully upwards") is another matter entirely. It was intended for the first week of Advent and was first performed in its complete form at the Thomaskirche on December 2, 1731. It offers a varied menu of items, including a chorale in duet form and one of the composer's most uplifting soprano arias, with a muted obbligato violin.

Barokkanerne is a leading Norwegian period-instrument ensemble which includes the Italian-Dutch oboist Alfredo Bernardini and his daughter, violinist Cecilia Bernardini. Cecilia offers sparkling solos throughout, especially in the beautiful "Auch mit gedämpften" aria from the Bach. Alfredo also has plenty of time to shine and switches to oboe d'amore in the Bach. All the instrumental work is fine and sensitive, and the singers shine both individually and corporately. Anders J. Dahlin is described in the liner notes as a "haute-contre tenor"—a rare, high type of tenor voice particularly used in French Baroque music. He has also made a name for himself in the Bach Passions and proves a sensitive Bachian here. Berit Norbakken Solset has a bright, birdlike soprano that is not unappealing in its own way, even though I fell out of sympathy with her way of popping the little turns in the Bach aria. Marianne Beate Kielland's plummy mezzo soprano is characteristically Bachian. But my favorite is Halvor F. Melien and his honeyed low baritone (I might have called him a bass). All the singers blend well together and are placed upfront, fostering warmth and intimacy.

The fine booklet includes reproductions of paintings by Rubens and other artists as well as photos of the musicians, liner notes in English and Norwegian, and cantata texts in German and English. This is a worthwhile outing, although putting the lesser lights next to Bach only makes him shine all the brighter. **Michael De Sapia**

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