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CD Review: Joseph Haydn (arr. José Peris), *The Seven Last Words of Christ: Version for String Quartet and Voice*, Henschel Quartett and Susanne Kelling, mezzo-soprano.

by Michael Weiss

Joseph Haydn (arr. José Peris). *The Seven Last Words of Christ: Version for String Quartet and Voice*. Henschel Quartett and Susanne Kelling (mezzo-soprano). Recorded 17–19 January 2012, Challenge Classics CC 72546, 2012, compact disc.
<http://www.challengerecords.com/products/1327409654/>

Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross* is no stranger to alternate versions. It first appeared as orchestral meditations on the final utterances of Christ on the cross as part of a Good Friday service in 1787, following a commission from Cadiz in Spain. For musical amateurs to enjoy these seven adagios (Haydn called them 'sonatas') with introduction and earthquake in the comfort of their own homes, Haydn adapted the collection for string quartet and also approved a keyboard version. After hearing a vocal arrangement in Passau by Joseph Friberth, he made his own oratorio-like version (published 1801) adding an interlude for wind and brass and calling upon Baron von Swieten to provide the text.

To this variety we may add a host of modern versions of the piece: some have added biblical readings and commentary or sought to replace the priest's spoken words with poetry, instrumental interludes or Gregorian chant; others have combined performance with visual arts and multimedia, or reduced the choral version down to a one-per-part vocal ensemble to be sung with the string quartet. Whichever way you are inclined to look at these new creative ideas—whether as simply addressing the practical-aesthetic need to make the piece fit better in secular concert halls and on CDs for commercial release, or as the inspired product of contemporary artists who are reflecting personally on the pain of the crucifixion—it becomes apparent that the dramatic and devotional nature of this programmatic work has given rise to some fascinating productions, and has resulted in a dynamic interpretative history.

Modern concert audiences have come to know the composer's own string quartet version perhaps best of all. Changing times have thus removed the *Seven Last Words* from its original setting in a Good Friday service. Brought to the modern stage, the work is now performed publicly in an arrangement that was originally intended for private recreation, in which musical amateurs were at liberty to preface each movement with all the ruminations of their domestic piety. Whereas Christian reflection may be absent from concert performances today, modern audiences have elevated the music itself to a level where they give it their attentive—for some, quasi-religious—devotion. For this reason, it has been possible for composers and performers to recreate in the concert hall or on a CD something of the original religious atmosphere, at least in spirit if not in liturgy.

A new version that arguably achieves this atmosphere in both regards is the 2012 recording by the Henschel Quartet with mezzo-soprano Susanne Kelling, released on the Challenge Classics label. The arrangement that they perform is one for string quartet and voice by the Spaniard José Peris Lacasa (b. 1924). This is a composer with a close connection to the church: he received his early musical education from priests (but continued with Darius Milhaud, Nadia Boulanger, Igor Markevich and Carl Orff), has devoted much of his career to composing sacred music and is Honorary Organist of the Chapel of the Royal Palace, Madrid. His approach to the *Seven Last Words*, however, has been neither to have the text proclaimed and interpreted before each movement, nor even to compose new material. Rather, as the liner notes explain:

Peris intervened very little into Haydn's original version. He transcribed for voice the words assigned in the first printed edition of Haydn's composition to the relevant musical motifs in the first violin part. To do this, he interwove the first violin part more closely with that of the second violin. The two violin parts from now on condense the composition's harmonic setting. The viola and violoncello parts remain essentially unchanged in comparison with the Haydn original. The voice always sings when the central motif underlying the relevant word of the Saviour returns and emerges in Haydn's compositional

setting. [...] The movements follow on directly from one another without thought or spoken words interrupting the flow.¹

In fact, the changes to the first violin are so unobtrusive that one barely notices they have been made at all, except when it drops out altogether. In a sense, this is a hybrid of the choral version (with a reduced vocal line), the string quartet version and, through its use of Latin rather than the oratorio's German, the Roman Catholic service. All told, the mezzo gets relatively little airtime, so that large parts of each sonata remain purely instrumental reflections, as Haydn originally conceived them. One might at first wonder whether coherence would be lost in having such short vocal sections far apart from one another. But it does not come across this way, at least not in the recording, though concert performance may present its own difficulties in this respect. Coherence is aided by the fact that Haydn's movements are largely monothematic meditations in which the passing of time is hardly felt. While one might not go as far as Rainer Lepuschitz, who in his liner notes raves about the 'extraordinarily charged arc of suspense' across the whole piece, it is certain that Peris has produced an elegantly coherent work with great economy of means.

The arrangement is perhaps more interesting than exciting, but it is in any case sensitive to Haydn's original material. As such, it may be fair to say that Peris intervenes little, for he adds no new melodic ideas and makes virtually no changes to the structure, but in another sense he has produced something totally new. Not much has changed when we look at a score, but in listening to this disc we are presented with a piece that is singularly different from each of the versions Haydn left behind. This contradiction works in the recording's favor, however, as it represents not just a new version of the work, but one that engages intelligibly with its history.

Indeed, I have only minor reservations about the otherwise assured arrangement. Sometimes, when the vocal line drops to the lower octave while the original violin line rises, the result sounds like an unfortunate second-best choice made out of

¹ Rainer Lepuschitz, trans. Abigail Prohaska, liner notes to: Joseph Haydn (arr. José Peris), *The Seven Last Words of Christ: Version for String Quartet and Voice*, with the Henschel Quartett and Susanne Kelling (mezzo-soprano), recorded 17-19 January 2012, Challenge Classics CC 72546, 2012, compact disc.

practical necessity. But Kelling smoothes this over, moving around registers with grace and control. Occasionally, too, the word-setting does not sit as comfortably as in Haydn's German. An example is "Amen dico tibi" in the second sonata, where "tibi" is made to be two quavers instead of one crotchet, as in the violin line. Again, though, Kelling's delivery is sympathetic to Haydn's original rhythmic profile.

The first sonata, "Pater, dimitte illis," begins with Kelling alone, singing a full strain of the violin's opening melody. The image of a lonely, forsaken Christ is a little obvious, although still touching, but the absence of any comparable solo vocal passage in the rest of the piece leaves the reasoning behind this one a little unclear. This solo opening gesture is to some degree mirrored by four solo bars in the last sonata ("Pater, in tuas manus"), taken from the violin duet a dozen bars from the end: first the mezzo sings the second violin part alone and then the first violin plays his part, also alone. It is an unusual approach to a duet, but it poignantly conveys the frailty of the dying Christ and is an apt culmination of the interactions between voice and violin that have occurred throughout the preceding adagios.

The most rewarding aspect of this disc, however, must be the superb performances. The Henschel Quartet plays with equal gravitas and grace, and they and Kelling match their colors to each other perfectly. Although Kelling devotes much of her career to operatic roles, in this recording she finds a voice that befits the intimacy of the small ensemble. Christoph Henschel as first violinist has the sound and attention to phrasing nuance that we have come to expect of the finest ensembles, and the quality of the recording shows off the musicians' excellent balance and clarity. The tempi are well chosen and vibrato is used reservedly and with great taste. The poise and sense of resignation in some of the inner movements is framed by a dramatic, sustained intensity in the introduction and a powerful rendition of the earthquake—truly delivered with "tutta la forza" as Haydn demanded.

While Peris' arrangement will not be to everybody's taste, it was evidently deemed appropriate from a religious perspective: Kelling and the Henschel Quartet were invited to the Vatican to perform it for Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 on the occasion of his patron saint's name day. For a broader audience, the CD is available from Naxos Music Library. On this and other legal internet streaming platforms, one can discover

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more albums by the Henschel Quartet, including (on Spotify) a sample of their excellent recording of Mendelssohn's complete string quartets on the Arte Nova/SonyBMG label. Although many groups are continuing to release fine recordings of Haydn string quartets, the present offering by the Henschel Quartet has me hoping that we will see more Haydn from them in the years ahead.

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