

TORMIS *An Aboriginal Song. Double Dedication. Crosswind. Our Shadows. Forging the Sampo. The Bishop and the Pagan. Incantation for a Stormy Sea. Curse upon Iron. Men's Songs*: 6 selections· Sofia SÖderberg Eberhard, cond; Svanholm Singers· TOCCATA 73 (67:49)

Veljo Tormis (b. 1930) is an Estonian composer. He studied choral conducting and organ at the Tallinn Music Institute, then organ and composition first at the Tallinn Conservatory, and then at the Moscow Conservatory, where he was a student of the noted composer and teacher, Vissarion Shebalin. From the start, he has been associated with choral music, winning first prize at the 1962 All-Union Young Composers' Competition for several works in the medium. The Soviet regime evidently liked Tormis, at least at that point in his career, awarding him a Merited Artist of the Estonian SSR honor in 1967.

It would be easy to lapse into admiration over the "folk primitiveness" of the composer's evolved musical style, what with its whisperings, its rhythmic incantations, its so-called shaman drum-and that's what I've heard from commentators the very few times I've heard this music featured in radio broadcasts. Except, of course, that choral whisperings have been around for some time, now, the incantations owe much to Carl Orff, and the shaman drum is simply a drum, played by a non-shaman named Veljo Tormis. Make no mistake, this is imaginatively composed and highly communicative music, but in my opinion there is no need when discussing it for vague rhapsodies about primeval soundscapes.

If the works on this album are anything to judge by, Tormis in the 1960s was very much a disciple of Kodaly, as witnessed here by *Our Shadows* (which could fit easily into the Hungarian's *Mountain Nights* series) and selections from *Men's Songs*. The other works, all from the 1980s and 1990s, are spare and, as mentioned above, redolent of Orff in their rhythmic syllabication, though Tormis is capable of adapting his non-lyrical manner to suit other needs of the moment. An example of this can be found in *The Bishop and the Pagan* (1992), where a modified Gregorian chant accompanies the part of the narrative that praises Saint Henry's missionary work and martyrdom, while Tormis deploys his basses in a more typically monotonal, rhythmic utterance to provide the contemporaneous Finnish point of view.

Aural drama is also characteristic of Tormis. He revels in depicting emotionally powerful situations that suit his narrow but charged style. *Double Dedication* sets a pair of poems, a heroic protest and a sadly resigned one, both by Estonian exiles under Soviet occupation. *Crosswind* features another text by an exiled Estonian poet, this one a sad reflection on his land buffeted eternally by powerful winds that refuse it a separate destiny. *Forging the Sampo* recalls the epical creation of a magical device in Finnish myth that could produce whatever a person desires.

Incantation for a Stormy Sea is self-explanatory. An opera, *Luigelend*, secured a first-class diploma for the composer, and the theater remains in his music.

Tormis cannily adds discreet textures to these pieces for variety and effect. A chromatic second line madrigalizes the crosswinds in the piece of the same name, while *Forging the Sampo* acquires both an anvil and drum. Ascending and descending arcs of whistling adorn sections of the *Incantation for a Stormy Sea*, while whispers are featured in *Curse upon Iron*. All this sounds very schematic, but the composer fully integrates these devices into his essentially consonant but freely tonal language.

The Svanholm Singers was formed in 1998 and has been led by Sofia Soderberg Eberhard since 2001. They've taken a number of awards: the 2002 Grand Prix at Hora Cantavi, in Poland; first prize at the 2005 Madetoja Festival in Lahti, Finland; three wins at the 2006 Seghizzi International Choir Competition in Gorizia, Italy; and first prize in both contemporary and Renaissance music at the "Tallinn 2007" 10th International Choir Festival. The performances on this album are well blended, intonationally razor sharp, and rhythmically precise. In virtuosic content such as this they truly get to show their mettle, which is of a fine quality.

With excellent sound and good timings, my only criticism of this release lies in its liner notes. We're given nothing on Tormis, and just a few lines on each of the pieces, in English, German, French, and Finnish. The rest of the booklet is made up of the original texts in Finnish and Latin, alongside English translations. This is something of a surprise from Toccata Classics, which normally does a fine job -in providing accompanying material for its releases. That aside, recommended. Would it be too presumptuous to request some orchestral music by Tormis, as well?

Barry Brenesal