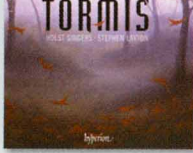
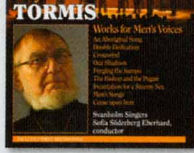


Veljo Tormis and Stephen Layton compare notes



Choirs from Sweden and the UK do justice to Tormis's wonderful songs

Tormis



An Aboriginal Song^a. The Bishop and the Pagan. Curse upon Iron^a. Forging the Sampo^{ab}. Double Dedication. Crosswind. Our Shadows. Incantation for a Stormy Sea. Men's Songs – Men's Song; Bundling Song; Betrothal Visiting Song; Song of the Turkish War; Serf's Song; Dancing Song

Svanholm Singers / Sofia Söderberg Eberhard with

^aVeljo Tormis, ^bStefan Engström *perc*

Toccata Classics © TOCC0073 (68' • DDD • T/t)

Tormis



Livonian Heritage. Singing Aboard Ship. Two Songs to Words by Ernst Enno. Three Estonian Game Songs. Three Songs from the Epic 'Kalev's Son'. Autumn Landscapes. Four Estonian Lullabies. Childhood Memory Herding Calls.

Holst Singers / Stephen Layton

Hyperion © CDA67601 (72' • DDD • T/t)

Curse upon Iron, The Bishop and the Pagan – comparative version:

Estonian Phil Chbr Cb, Kaljuste (ECM) 465 223-2

Livonian Heritage – comparative version:

Estonian Phil Chbr Cb, Kaljuste (ECM) 434 275-2

The quality of choral singing in the Baltic region is legendary, and with the 20 male voices of the Svanholm singers – most of them apparently students at Lund University – the legend lives on. Tormis writes that any of his doubts about the 2006 concert they organised in his honour melted with just a few phrases from his “Double Dedication”. No wonder. Both music and performance of this celebration of two poets who emigrated from Soviet Estonia to Sweden immediately seize the attention, even without knowledge of the poems, the cultural role of the poets or the nature of the composer's tribute to them – all of which only serve to reinforce and deepen the initial impact.

So, which to single out? The phenomenal precision of intonation, tonal focus and communicative urgency in the singing, the high-mindedness and vividness of the poetry, or the music's sheer range of appeal and refusal to recognise boundaries between different kinds of audience? There are rich pickings here, the programme covering a gamut of expression from folk-comic-macho through saga-epic to wondrous-romantic.

In “Curse upon Iron” and “The Bishop and the Pagan” there is the strongest possible competition from the composer's fellow Estonians. These are very different interpretations by a larger choir, with a softer-edged quality, no more or less valid. Tormis himself gives the disc a symbolic imprimatur by playing the shaman drum in “An Aboriginal Song” and “Curse upon Iron”. Whistling, sighing, tongue-clicking, falsetto and log drumming add to the tonal palette but the music and singing are seductive enough even without them. Documentation is exemplary, recording quality perfectly judged. As a package, I would say irresistible.

Hard on its heels comes another beautifully prepared and executed compilation. Stephen Layton and his Holst Singers have a well deserved reputation as bold explorers, and their intelligence and dedication are evident here. To my ears at least, it seems that the language barrier has not proved greatly inhibiting: they've thrown down the gauntlet to others outside the Baltic region to investigate this superb repertoire.

By comparison with the crack Nordic teams, the English voices are admittedly a degree softer-focused in tone and not quite so high-pressure in expression. The composer's compatriots bring even more electricity to the five marvellous songs that make up *Livonian Heritage*, for example, though the Holst Singers find a subtlety and affection that certainly compensates. In any case, given that there is little very duplication of repertoire with available CDs (and none at all with the superb Svanholmers), and that the quality of Tormis's output is wonderfully consistent, there is really no reason for the specialist collector not to invest in both new issues. **David Fanning**