

**De Orto and Josquin:
Music in the Sistine Chapel
around 1490**

Cut Circle; Jesse Rodin, director
Musique en Wallonie
MEW 1265-1266 (2 CDs)
www.cutcircle.com

To better understand the master Josquin des Prez (c. 1450/1455-1521) and his unique style, the Renaissance vocal ensemble Cut Circle, under the direction of Stanford professor Jesse Rodin, explores a well-documented period (1489-1494) in his life in this 2-CD set. The recording is centered around music Josquin probably wrote in Rome, but for comparison also includes nine world-premiere pieces by contemporaries (all singers in the Sistine Chapel Choir in the late 15th century), one of whom is Marbrianus de Orto (c. 1460-1529), the other featured composer.

The tracks are nicely organized, lending themselves well to comparison. We are immediately immersed in Josquin's style, with a hymn and excerpts from two masses that open the first disc. A diverse selection of pieces by Gaspar van Weerbeke follows. His "Dulcis amica mea/Da pacem" is particularly beautiful. An anonymous setting of the Credo acts as a palate cleanser—it employs primarily homophonic writing—and is a welcome change of pace. Music



by de Orto follows, with a Gloria setting from his *Missa Ad fugam*. Two tract settings of

"Domine non secundum peccata nostra," the first by Bertrandus Vaqueras, the second by Josquin, conclude the first disc. Vaqueras's setting is very active and ornate.

The second disc features two masses based on the popular "L'homme armé" melody. If you are unfamiliar with the melody, it is considerably included as a brief second track on the disc. De Orto's *Missa L'homme armé* is relatively unknown, and contrasts with Josquin's more famous setting. I find de Orto's setting (and the rest of his pieces on the recording) refreshing. He employs a slightly more exotic sound world than Josquin. De Orto's "Ave Maria mater gratie" is absolutely stunning and nicely sung one to a part. Just like the Credo in the first disc, the "Factum est silentium" chant provides a calm break and prepares us for Josquin's *Missa L'homme armé*, which concludes the second disc. The CD concept and selections are excellent—it's not always easy to find music that is both unrecorded and interesting.

Cut Circle uses only one or two singers to a part on this recording—the best way to deliver the clarity required for Renaissance polyphony. Rodin, a professor at Stanford University and a specialist in 15th-century music, interprets these pieces perfectly. The tempos and shaping are spot on and bring to life this great music, which is too often recorded and performed with a lack of vitality. The ensemble is tight, and

each line of polyphony is sung clearly and expressively. The basses and sopranos sound particularly good, both parts executing with a great sense of ease and body in the sound. The booklet is a work of art and is translated into four languages—French, Dutch, English, and German. The engineering and production are very good, striking a wonderful balance between presence and ambience. This recording is a great addition to any music collection.

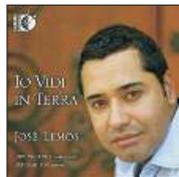
—Markdavin Obenza

Io Vidi in Terra

José Lemos, countertenor;
Jory Vinikour, harpsichord;
Deborah Fox, theorbo
Sono Luminus DSL-92172
(2 discs: Blu-ray and CD)
www.sonoluminus.com

This highly musical collection presents works by Claudio Monteverdi, Girolamo Frescobaldi, Barbara Strozzi, and the lesser-known Tarquinio Merula, Marco da Gagliano, Bernardo Storace, and Benedetto Ferrari for a well-rounded re-creation of musical life in the 17th-century Italian ducal courts.

Castrati began appearing in ducal courts around the middle of the 16th century. By the time this music was conceived, they were the dominant upper male voice in both stage and chamber music. Short of employing the knife, reviving music written for castrati will always be an approximate affair, but performances by countertenors are not inherently inferior music-making. The quality and virtuosity of many contemporary performers surely comes



close to the unfortunate original. A large range of possible techniques, from

Graham Pushee's rough-edged sound to Phillipe Jaroussky's sweetness, challenges the notion that the art form is forever lost.

Brazilian countertenor José Lemos finds a very pleasing middle ground. His rich timbre is complemented by a flexible, agile, and accurate coloratura technique. Vocal fireworks abound and never overshadow the excellent phrasing and shaping of musical lines. Lemos's range is impressive, and a seamless transition from head to chest voice gives him enormous expressive strength. He is certainly the most

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