

Music Reviews (continued)

Michael Praetorius: *Puer natus in Bethlehem* Christmas settings for vocal and instrumental ensemble, Vols. 9–11, each in 8 parts

Edited by Günter and Leonore von Zadow

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www.guentersberg.de

These three volumes form part of a considerable series of Güntersberg Christmas settings by the amazingly versatile and prolific Michael Praetorius (1571–1621) culled from the nine parts of *Musae Sioniae* that he published between 1607 and 1610. The editors' preface explains how this music has been an essential part of their families' Christmas music-making for many years, and that they now wish to make it available to a wider audience. These pieces have been available in scholarly editions for many years, but not in an accessible format with separate playing parts. Those with smaller performing forces might well wish to explore the earlier volumes in this series (1 a2; 2 a3; 3–4 a4; 5–6 a5; 7 a6; 8 a7), while these three volumes all provide eight-part pieces, each based on a well-known Lutheran hymn tune, arranged in double-choir layout. It is not clear from the covers (identical apart from the volume number) what is in each, so the contents are:

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| Vol. 9 | Gelobet seist du Jesu Christ | In dulci jubilo |
| Vol. 10 | Nun komm der Heiden Heiland | Puer natus in Bethlehem |
| Vol. 11 | Vom Himmel hoch (three different settings) | |

The editors suggest that these pieces might be sung unaccompanied, or with voices doubled by instruments, or with instruments substituting for voices, as Praetorius explains in his various writings on performance practice. They would also be reasonably effective as purely instrumental pieces, but the shapes of the phrases are often so closely framed to the texts that I think you would miss some vocal input quite quickly. In vols 9 and 10 the two choirs are of similar ranges (original clefs were C1, C3, C4, F4 for each choir) whereas the 'Vom Himmel hoch' settings of vol. 11 are differentiated as 'high' and 'slightly lower' (C1, C1, C3, C4; C1, C3, C4, F4). There seems to be no particularly good reason why Günthersberg have decided to use treble clef for the alto of choir 1 and octave-down treble clef for the alto of choir 2 in the equal choir pieces, since none of the alto parts goes higher than A, and they are all of pretty similar overall ranges. In terms of viols, the ranges suggest trebles on the C1 parts, tenors on the C3 parts, tenors or basses on the C4 parts and basses on the F4 parts, though the tenor players are not provided with alto clef parts. None of the parts is very wide-ranging, so they would also be easily playable on renaissance wind instruments.

What's the music like? Praetorius is always a master of his craft, setting the well-known texts and melodies in often ingeniously unexpected ways, as in 'In dulci jubilo' where each phrase is treated to extended interplay between the two choirs before culminating in a sonorous eight-part tutti. Vol. 10 has the biggest contrast, between the sombre minor-mode and mostly homophonic 'Nun komm der Heiden Heiland' and the unrepressed exaltation of 'Puer natus' with its playful triple-time echoing angel choruses and hemiola-filled 'allelujas'. Vol. 11 provides a wonderful study in compositional style, with three settings of the same melody, each treated rather differently. The first starts with a slow contrapuntal descent through all the parts ('from heaven on high ...'), the second uses the chorale in block harmony, and the third ends with decorative running figures to illustrate 'singing'.

For vocal performance it would have been good to have more verses provided: in some of Praetorius's settings of 'Vom Himmel hoch' two stanzas were originally underlaid, whereas Günthersberg only give us one for each section. For the particularly obsessive, all fifteen stanzas can be obtained online at www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com, or by consulting the indispensable *New Oxford Book of Carols*. Non-German speaking singers will also need translations, which can also be obtained online at www2.cpd.org.

As with all Günthersberg productions, the performance materials are very accurate and clear to read, though the scores are quite small and tightly packed with 24 staves on an A4 page. One curiosity is the decision to use Praetorius's distinctive forward slash (/) rather than a comma to show breaks between repetitions of text, and there is no distinction made between original and editorial texting. Duple time sections are left in original note values, barred in 4/2, while triple sections have note values reduced by quartering, which might lead performers to adopt a rather more jazzy approach to syncopations than Praetorius might have expected.

So, tune your viols (though in what temperament – 'Puer natus' uses chords of B major as well as C major?), blow the dust off your sackbuts, put the wine on to mull, and enjoy exploring this collection with your family and friends.

John Bryan