

Michael Praetorius: Weihnachtliche Bicinien for two low instruments

ed. Günter and Leonore von Zadow, Edition Güntersberg (G324) 2017. ISMN 979-0-50174-324-7. Two performance scores, €14.80.

Michael Praetorius is one of the most significant and prolific composers of music for the Lutheran Church from the beginning of the seventeenth century. He produced some twenty separate publications of music, the vast majority of which are specifically for Lutheran usage. His first major collection, the *Musae Sioniae*, published in nine installments between 1605 and 1610, primarily contains the large-scale polychoral works for which he is most famous, but two of the issues in this

collection, the fifth part (1607) and the ninth part (1610), also have settings for smaller forces. Pieces based on Lutheran chorales are prevalent throughout the collection and are just as well represented in the smaller settings as in the larger ones. In fact, these two volumes from his *Musae Sioniae* both systematically set chorale tunes from the entire church year in a variety of different scorings. These two parts, especially the ninth one, contain a large number of two-voice settings, some of which are published in the score under review.

Between 2008 and 2010 Edition Güntersberg produced a twelve-volume series of settings of music by Praetorius for Christmas, called *Puer natus in Bethlehem*; it collects many of the Christmas settings from *Musae Sioniae*. Of particular interest is the first volume of this series, catalogue number G151, which is not under review here but could be seen as a companion volume; it contains twelve two-part pieces for Christmas in a variety of combinations of ranges. The commentary at the front of the low-voices volume explains the rationale for printing it. The original volume from the *Puer natus* set is a best-seller for Güntersberg, but is somewhat limited in its usefulness because all of the pieces in it include at least one for high voices. The present edition contains nine of the twelve pieces from the earlier publication transposed into bass viol range. In some cases, the transposition is simply an octave, but about half the pieces are transposed down a further fourth to keep the collection in a consistent tessitura. The idea is to make the pieces accessible to players of bass instruments who are uncomfortable with transposition, and thus creates an expanded following for this repertoire. The pieces themselves are based on chorales spanning the whole of the Advent and Christmas seasons, ranging from "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme" to "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern," with music for Christmas proper represented by tunes such as "Puer natus in Bethlehem" and "Von Himmel hoch."

The treatment of the chorale material varies widely across the different pieces in the volume. Some of them, such as "Puer natus in Bethlehem" and "Wie schön leuchtet," quote the chorale melody almost verbatim with little elaboration. The first, in fact, uses a cantus firmus technique. At the other extreme are the composer's treatments of "Wachet auf" and "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland," where initial points of imitation allude to the chorale tune while original contrapuntal material is interpolated between the recognizable phrases. For players unfamiliar with the chorale tunes, it would be challenging to make sense of these pieces, as the counterpoint is fairly abstruse. Most of the other pieces in the collection lie somewhere between the two extremes—the chorale tune is recognizable throughout in one or both voices, with decoration at the cadences.

These pieces are not technically demanding: they were initially conceived for voices, so the lines have fairly small ranges and no large leaps. The main difficulties are with ensemble, due to the many tricky rhythmic places and sophistication of the

counterpoint, which especially presents a challenge if you do not know the chorale tunes upon which the pieces are based. Taken in the context of Renaissance polyphonic duets, these pieces have more immediacy than many, in part because they are based on preexisting material that was designed to be memorable and easy to sing.

The edition itself lives up to Güntersberg's exacting production standards, so is very clear and easy to read. Since the pieces are all quite short, it makes sense to present them in score form and this edition provides two copies, one bound in with the front matter and one in a separate booklet. Both parts are in bass clef throughout by design, in order to make it maximally accessible. The edition, like the original, has full-text underlay. This makes it possible to perform with singers but also, if you know the original chorale tunes, helps to make sense of the counterpoint. Only one verse of each chorale appears in the modern edition, so if you wish to perform multiple verses, the performers must look up and underlay the text themselves. Judging from the facsimile examples printed in the front of the book, the original published multiple verses on a space-available basis, so this practice is in keeping with the spirit of the original edition. My main quibble with the new edition's presentation is that its front material is entirely about how this version differs from its preceding high-voice version. It contains no mention of editorial practice or sources. To get this information one would presumably need to consult the prior version. A publisher with Güntersberg's editorial standards would surely want to provide this information somewhere for the curious reader.

This volume is an excellent addition to libraries of both amateur players looking for rewarding, and not hugely challenging, bass duets to play with a friend, and of teachers looking for material to use with upper intermediate-level bass players. Since these pieces were originally vocal, they can also be done with friends who play bass instruments other than the viol. They would work well with a singer, a bass recorder, dulcian, sackbut, or other instrument that can play in the bass range and would be a lovely addition to seasonal music-making in the home, church, or concert venue. Bass-clef-reading musicians now have fuller access to these pieces, which will be sure to delight listeners in the upcoming holiday season.

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