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To the Glory of Bach and God

By George Pratt

“Eighteen years later, this last CD is the pinnacle of an outstanding achievement.”

Amid the devastation after the Kobe earthquake of January 1995, the Chapel of the Kobe Shoin Women’s University provided the peaceful recording venue for Masaaki Suzuki’s first of 55 discs of Bach Cantatas. Eighteen years later, this last CD is the pinnacle of an outstanding achievement.

Suzuki studied in Amsterdam, spent time in Europe, and brought this experience back to a country with a relatively rudimentary tradition of Baroque performance: a striking feature of his recordings is the technical and expressive development of his instrumentalists. On this final disc, though, the trumpeters are European imports led by Jean-François Madeuf. His playing, on a natural instrument without modern tuning vent-holes, is stunning, his gentle attack and subtle articulation in the opening of Cantata BWV 69 perfectly matching oboes and violins in balance and expressivity.

Suzuki has consistently used three or four singers to a part, often including his soloists. Such modest numbers create a ‘chorus-effect’ – slight variations in pitch and attack creating a warm, rounded tone which contrasts with the cutting edge of his orchestral instruments. There’s a striking transparency in even the densest of counterpoint – the final chorus of BWV 191 sometimes divides into 15 or 16 independent parts. And his singers are fearless; where other CDs sometimes allocate to soloists the stream of fast semiquaver figurations of this movement (adapted from ‘Cum Sancto Spiritu’ of the B Minor Mass), here four-to-a part voices sing with total ease and unanimity.

The University Chapel, with its French-style Classical organ, was designed by a distinguished acoustician and built in 1983. Its 3.8-second reverberation, carefully planned, has consistently lent a distinctive warmth to the recordings. The glow which suffuses oboe, violin, continuo and Robin Blaze’s alto in the first aria of BWV 69 is captivating, as is Peter Kooij’s rumbustious bass dance proclaiming ‘Gelobet sei Gott’, (Praise be to God), in BWV 30 – this is Bach in jolly, secular mode. The other soloists are no less excellent, tenor Gerd Türk effortless, and soprano Hana Bla-iková restored to gloriously even tone after some recent hard edges.

In SACD mode, which the Swedish record label BIS laudably retains, the effect is truly moving. The Chapel’s spaciousness is palpable, and individual sounds are positioned with pin-point accuracy.

Over 18 years Suzuki seems to have subtly changed his relationship with Bach, from a reverential approach to confident familiarity. The final Cantata of this complete series is uncannily apt: ‘Gloria in Excelsis’ indeed!