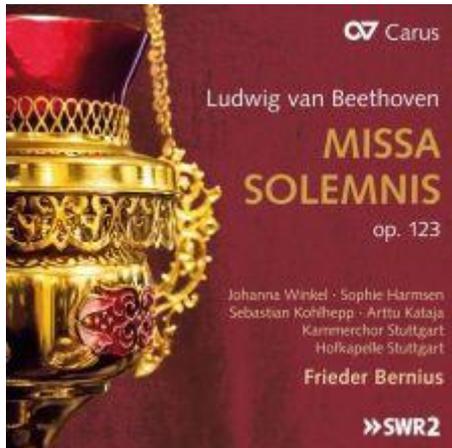


Gramophone, 8/2019: „editor’s choice“

BEETHOVEN *Missa solemnis*



Johanna Winkel (sop)
Sophie Harmsen (alto)
Sebastian Kohlhepp (ten)
Arttu Kataja (bass)
Stuttgart Chamber Choir
Stuttgart Hofkapelle
Frieder Bernius *Conductor*

BEETHOVEN *Missa solemnis*

Author: Peter Quantrill

Without minimising either the monumental elements of Beethoven’s long gestated Mass setting or its sheer difficulty, Frieder Bernius coaches from his performers an assured and even (where appropriate) relaxed mastery of the notes and phrases before them. The big choral fugues – not forgetting the ‘*Dona nobis pacem*’ – dance with a celestial lightness of touch, related for once to their secular cousins in the late quartets.

The chosen pitch is A=430 (like Gardiner, unlike Suzuki’s 440), the choir similarly proportioned to both of them, the instrumentarium even more vividly coloured with an early 19th-century palette: a warmly buzzing bassoon, crisp timpani making their presence felt well before the fretful concertante of their intervention mid-*Agnus* and a pure-toned string section always well partnered with their wind colleagues. Using dabs of vibrato, the well-tuned violin solo of the *Benedictus* evokes its kinship with the Violin Concerto in the same key.

The conditions of the recording seem propitious: made after a short concert tour of Germany and Italy, under studio conditions over two days in the resonant but not cloudy acoustic of a Catholic basilica just over the border from Strasbourg, a little south of Stuttgart where the ensembles are based. Those fugues are well bedded into minds, voices and fingers. (A mid-tour performance is available on YouTube, filmed in the Italian Alps and worth watching for Bernius’s unassuming direction as well as the rococo splendours of the cathedral in Bressanone/Brixen.)

No less crucially, the soloists have had time to sing with each other: they form a notably well-matched team, not competing with each other or fighting for room with choir and orchestra (if

occasionally congested on headphones). Thus, past a forthright opening chord, the Mass is launched with a properly devotional *Kyrie*, taken at a forward-moving pulse that admits any number of happy little instrumental up beats and a beautifully judged pause before the reprise.

Rhythmic intelligence has always distinguished Bernius's recordings – such as the *German Requiem* I placed top of the pile in a Collection article (4/08) – and he never allows a line to sag (crisply enunciated German Latin helps). I like very much the jubilant close to the *Gloria*, rounded off rather than running into a wall, and the basic tempo for the *Credo*, marginally more lively than usual, which recasts its audacious reprise (at 9'54") as a peal of bells, banishing for good the long Baroque shadows of the 'Crucifixus' and a moment of apt but unexpected suspense at 'judicare'. Would another Collection choose Bernius over his rivals, present and past?