

Innisfree

Anam Cara/ James Jordan—GIA 723—67 minutes

Anam Cara (Celtic for “soul mates”) is a select ensemble that draws on Westminster Choir College’s supremely accomplished student singers—mostly those of the Westminster Williamson Voices, the school’s premier chamber choir. Rounding out their membership are recent graduates and alumni with established careers. The group is configured differently according to the music at hand, but never exceeds 20 voices. Here, in their first recording, they bring us a choice assortment of a cappella and accompanied classics, both ancient and modern. As director Jordan tells us in his inspired program notes, these pieces reflect the themes of “hope, dreams, and living”.

The earliest music we hear is a poignant madrigal—‘The Silver Swan’—by Orlando Gibbons. The choir’s penchant for the wonderful music of Renaissance-baroque bridge composers shows in attractive works from Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck and Hans Leo Hassler. The latter’s ‘Verbum Caro Factum Est’, a glorious feast of antiphonal interplay, is given an especially skillful and shining rendition. Johann Hermann Schein’s absorbing ‘Christ lag in Todesbanden’ is based on Martin Luther’s plainchant-inspired chorale tune that Bach later took to its greatest musical heights.

Due tribute to the romantic masters comes with Mendelssohn’s radiant ‘Verleih uns Frieden’, a serenely simple bit of imitative counterpoint à la Bach. Then there’s Brahms’s ‘Geistliches Lied’, Op. 30, an especially cunning piece that pairs off sections of the choir in canon, then brings the initial “teams” together in an infinitely more complex canonic exercise. Mind-boggling stuff. Both pieces have subtle organ support.

The remaining pieces are more modern. Some of the best are Benjamin Britten’s ‘New Year Carol’, a lovely and deceptively simple

piece for treble voices, and Aaron Copland’s bright ‘Sing ye Praises to our King’. There’s also a glowing account of Morten Lauridsen’s beloved ‘O Magnum Mysterium’. ‘Ose Shalom’, by John Leavitt, is a touching Jewish prayer setting. The album’s heart is found in Gerald Custer’s ‘Innisfree’, a luminous piece that enhances the poetry of William Butler Yeats. Innisfree, a lake-island in Ireland, was to Yeats something like what Walden Pond was to Thoreau—and the music’s quiet nostalgia indeed reflects his “deep heart’s core”. Just as touching is Roger Ames’s ‘Choral Reflection on Amazing Grace’—a gentle but spiritually potent fantasia on the famous hymn.

We’re also treated to some fine folk material, like the famous Stuart Churchill arrangement of ‘Black is the Color of my True Love’s Hair’. The rich “spiritual” tradition is honored with Rollo A Dilworth’s gospel-tinged arrangement of ‘I Been ‘Buked’ and the anti-war sentiments of ‘Down by the Riverside’—in a first solemn, then celebratory treatment from Ames.

Here is a choir to please the fussiest choral connoisseur. Westminster—the Juilliard of the choral world—attracts the very finest young voices and refuses to hide them behind the often sterile purity of tone that some choirs cultivate. The matchless vocal training they get—both individually and collectively—enables them to produce a huge range of choral colors and effects: everything from icy vocal transparency to rich, full-throated glory. Perhaps no other college’s choirs maintain such a consistently high level of all-around choral artistry from year to year (well, maybe St Olaf’s). The accompanists leave nothing to be desired.

We get excellent sound and nice packaging, but the booklet lacks texts for all but a few pieces. Most listeners have trouble discerning complete texts, no matter how good a choir’s diction is. And some of us pay close attention to the marriage of words and music. Still, that shouldn’t stop any true choral fan from snapping this one up.

KOOB