

American Record Guide

MUSGRAVE: *Voices of Our Ancestors*;

Missa Brevis; Rorate Coeli

New York Virtuoso Singers/ Harold Rosenbaum;

American Brass Quintet

Lyrita 387—63 minutes

I associate Thea Musgrave with avant-garde musical adventures, but this choral program reveals a startling range of style and sensibility, from the daring to the disarmingly conservative. The performances are by turns sweetly lyrical and intensely aggressive, as the music requires. Musgrave's breadth should not be surprising, as she is now 92 and has written for numerous occasions and varied genres, including opera, ballet, choral, and orchestral. She doesn't like being pinned down, and that includes being regarded as a female composer (even though she studied with Nadia Boulanger and was acutely aware of her status as a female composer.) "When I'm composing", she says, "I'm a human being. It's not a question of sexuality."

Perhaps her most consistent attribute is a sense of drama, a willingness to try anything. When she turned 90 Harold Rosenbaum, the authoritative and sympathetic conductor here, used a sports metaphor: "It's like she has a baseball team with 9 people on the field, but 80 people in the bullpen, and she starts throwing them on the field in different arrangements. She has so many tricks up her sleeve, but all for the good of the music. Nothing is silly or just thrown in for the sake of doing it. It all makes sense."

The earliest work, the 1977 *Rorate Coeli for a cappella* choir, has the most tricks and might appear to make the least sense, though it has its own idiosyncratic sense of structure and unity. It is certainly the most overtly modernist work here, partly sung, partly chanted or spoken, sometimes whispered or shrieked, full of dizzying aleatory passages, a work that helped cement Musgrave's reputation in the avantgarde. It is packed with imagination and color, with contrast between soaring solos, dense chords, chittery chance-music effects, and unpredictable polyphony. The choral glissandos in the upper registers are spine-tingling.

In the ambitious, large-scaled *Voices of Our Ancestors*, from 2014, Musgrave immerses herself in different cultures and ancient texts (Persian Greek, Chinese, and others, all translated into English.) The choral writing is colored by delicate, sometimes sinister brass, performed here with spiky eloquence by the American Brass Quintet. The harmonic idiom is again modernist, but not harshly so; indeed, some of the bitonalities are strikingly gentle.

After these complex, layered pieces, so full of effects, the most recent work, *Missa Brevis*, from 2018, comes as a relief, a point of relaxation. It's like a master painter showing she can do a simple sketch. It is homophonic, diatonic, and heartfelt. The Sanctus has a sweet innocence, the Agnus Dei a ghostlike stillness; the soloists have an angelic purity.

Rounding out this welcome release are the excellent notes by Peter Conway. The recordings, from St Mary's and Advent Lutheran in New York, are clear enough, with just the right amount of churchy echo and ambiance.

--SULLIVAN