CD Review


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A key moment in the history of Belgian freemasonry was the elaborate Lodge of Sorrow organized by the Grand Orient of Belgium to mark the death of their king, Leopold 1 (1790–1865). The nation itself had been created only in 1831 and so what can properly be termed Belgian freemasonry was relatively new. The ceremony that was arranged by the Grand Orient of Belgium sought not only to provide a secular alternative and a direct challenge to the legitimacy assumed by Belgium’s Catholic hierarchy to control the mourning and funeral rites of the dead king, but also to claim Leopold for freemasonry. It is doubtful that Leopold actively belonged to either the Catholic Church or to the Grand Orient, despite him having given succour to both during his reign.

The masonic ceremony that was staged in the Grand Temple of the Grand Orient was lavish and high profile, which set off heated public debate between those parties seeking to apply the principles of secularism in all affairs of the Belgian state and their religiously motivated opponents. The event and its aftermath would set the secularist tone of Grand Orient freemasonry in Belgium to the present day and the episode has been explored in the pages of this journal (see JRFF Vol. 3 no. 2), in articles by Jeffrey Tyssens and David Vergauwen.

An undoubted high point in the king’s Lodge of Sorrow was the semi-staged cantata Aux Mânes d’un Frère qui fut Roi—text by Charles-Antoine Bosselet (1840–1916)—that was set to music by Karel-Lodewijk (Charles-Louis) Hanssens, the younger (1802–71) who was then the music director of the Belgian national opera house La Monnaie in Brussels. Both men were freemasons of the Grand Orient of Belgium.

After its initial performance the cantata fell into oblivion and was thought lost. Recently however, the Belgian musicologist David Vergauwen has tracked down the composer’s manuscript of the work in the library of the Belgian Royal Academy of Music. The find came about while Vergauwen was completing his doctoral thesis on freemasonry and music in nineteenth-century Belgium at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. As a result of his determination to hear the cantata in full Vergauwen prepared a new performing edition of it and organized the work’s first public performance. This took place on 22 February 2015, given by the Metropolist Orkest & Koor (Metropolist Orchestra and Chorus) at the Zuiderpershuis concert hall in Antwerp. The studio recording reviewed here was made by the same forces shortly afterwards.

The text of the cantata comprises two parts. The first portrays the sorrow of freemasons mourning the death of the king, while the second describes the elation...
of all souls at the rise of the king’s spirit to immortality. The text is unashamedly secular in tone making use of heroic historic references. The music itself is masterful and richly scored on a large scale for strings, woodwind, brass, harp, percussion and mixed chorus together with four soloists and a narrator.

The original performers —both male and female— were all drawn from the forces of the La Monnaie opera house (where masonic membership was then high) and the style—particularly in the use of woodwind, brass and percussion—is reminiscent of the orchestral writing in the operas of such towering musical figures as Hector Berlioz (1803–69), and Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864). Hanssens himself composed several operas although sadly none are performed today. Indeed, apart from this cantata—which is effectively a short opera in all but name—no other example of the music of Hanssens is currently commercially available.

At 26 minutes this CD might be considered rather short and I feel it was a missed opportunity not to have included some other example of Hanssens’s works on it. Also, the CD comes with only the most minimal notes in Dutch without the work’s text, and so to fully appreciate the work in performance it will be necessary to gain access to Vergauwen’s article cited above which also contains the text in French and English.

However, the most important thing is the music itself, and the well-paced performance on this recording is polished and impressive, with every nuance of light and shade deftly controlled by the baton of Jaak Gregoor, from the gentlest pianissimo to the strongest fortissimo. The recording quality is excellent. The soloists too are admirable: Anne Cambrier, soprano; Sandra Paelinck, mezzo-soprano; Robert Luis, tenor; Simon Schmidt, bass; Charles Dekeyser, narrator. In short the team performing here appears to be very much at home with the music of this period and I highly recommend this well-recorded and expertly performed musical and masonic rarity to music lovers and masonic scholars alike.

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