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A Boston Camerata Christmas: Worlds of Early Christmas Music

The Boston Camerata/Joel Cohen (Warner Classics & Jazz 2564 69415-0)

23 December 2008 4 stars

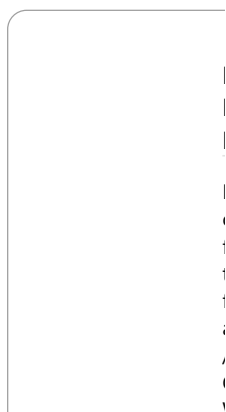
Boston CamerataI knew of one of these discs already since this attractive three CD boxed set is comprised of albums recorded in the late Eighties and early Nineties for the Erato label. Listening afresh I am struck instantly by how successful **Joel Cohen** and **The Boston Camerata** are at collaborating with other specialist musicians since on these discs we hear them work with ensembles as diverse as **The Brown University Chorus** and **Abdelkrim Rais Andalusian Orchestra of Fès**. Presented together like this these three albums, *An American Christmas*, *A French Christmas* and *A Spanish Christmas* display the wide achievements of one of the longest-standing early music ensembles and their director emeritus, **Joel Cohen**.

The first album in this set is *An American Christmas* and in many ways it is also the most thought provoking. I like the slightly confrontational tone to Cohen's sleeve notes and I agree with him when he admonishes Americans for having 'a collective inferiority complex about popular culture'. Some of this hymn repertoire tends to be known to us today only in the arrangements of Sir David Willcocks and his contemporaries and as such we have come to associate it with the voices of middle-class choirboys. I found 'Adeste fideles' and 'While shepherds watched' particularly moving when performed simply by the folk-like tones of Cohen's singers and once devoid of their Oxbridge cloaks, I could imagine the roles that such tunes may have played in domestic situations and simple church services.

In many ways this programme shows us how disappointing it is that we have come to recognize the English choral sound as authoritative in this repertoire and I'm pleased that Cohen, in his notes and his performances, is

interested in redressing this balance. This project has, however, inadvertently produced quite an odd situation, that is the resurrection of amateur music by highly skilled professional musicians and questions arising from the resulting performance ought to keep philosophers occupied for quite a while.

The French and Spanish discs are also beautifully crafted and with so many short pieces to fill each one Cohen and his musicians have programmed them to flow through the ages so that we go on something of a time-travel as we listen. In the case of *A French Christmas* it started with some plainsong sung in French by solo baritone that I felt was surprisingly singerly for Cohen's ensemble. However the attractive folksy sound came back by track three when the marvelous **Anne Azéma**, **Ellen Hargis** and **Laurie Monahan** sing the 'Kyrie's. Azéma is an inspired choice as new Artstic Director in my opinion; just listening to her contribution on these discs should convince most people of that too.



So much of what The Boston Camerata do hinges on their excellent sense of timing both in solo song and ensemble pieces. Across these three programmes I notice the rustic and folk quality of the voices does not create a rough-and-ready sound world as one might expect since despite moving away from the Oxbridge habit of singing on long vowel sounds, delaying diphthongs and pronouncing Latin with a slight hint of Italian, these performances are no less polished. Again and again it is their very musical sense of timing that is most arresting and makes some of the pieces sound like perfect improvisations. On *A Spanish Christmas* we hear more of **Michael Colliver** (countertenor) and I was particularly impressed by his impassioned 'Madree de Deus, ora por nós', which is about as far removed from the sound of choral evensong as is possible.

Warner Classics have wisely made the texts and translations available as an optional download from their website. They were not simple to find however, only when I searched on 'Joel Cohen' rather than the title of any particular track or even 'The Boston Camerata' did I get offered a pdf file for the whole boxed set. But the effort is worthwhile since there are 33 pages of translations in three languages and, more importantly, notes on the sources and history of each track which give a valuable insight into this repertoire.

Not everyone is going to enjoy these discs, of course, but debunking our cherished Christmas music traditions – however contrived they may be – takes some courage and to pull it off this well is an outstanding achievement. This earthy approach to early music can often backfire because it demands an immediate and often declamatory style that can be a little overpowering at times. Amazingly, Cohen sacrifices none of these qualities but still manages to make the end product beautiful. It may be too late to buy one for this Christmas but that should not stop you from squirreling it away for next year.

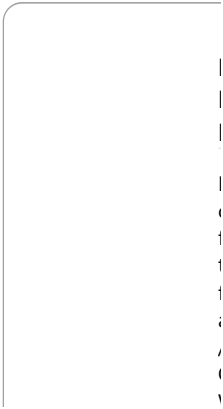
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