

Glory to the ASO choir

Pierre Ruhe – Staff, Atlanta Journal Constitution
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Vaughan Williams: G minor Mass and other a cappella works.
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chamber Chorus, conducted by Norman Mackenzie.
54 minutes. Telarc.

Grade: A

A new CD helps explain why the planned Atlanta Symphony Center includes a controversial feature: a movable ceiling. Still in the design phase, the ceiling height will adjust the acoustics, up to a resonant cathedral echo, ideal for a cappella choral music – the repertoire heard on this debut solo album.

Choral director Norman Mackenzie prepared and conducted the 68 voices, and the sound is, in a word, glorious. The music covers a wide span in years but is unified by traditional church styles, bookended by two settings of the motet "O sacrum convivium," by modernist Frenchman Olivier Messiaen (born in 1908) and Elizabethan Englishman Thomas Tallis (born in 1505). The most recent work is John Tavener's 1993 "Song for Athene," hushed, serene music of loss (and a classical hit after it was heard at Princess Diana's funeral).

Mackenzie gets a pure, chaste, "bleached" tone from his singers, with minimal interpretive fuss. That approach leaves Durufle's "Four Motets on Gregorian Themes" sounding rather unsculpted. It's a subtle difference, more austere and English than garish and French.

Aaron Copland's Four Motets, youthful pieces the American wrote as a student in France, are a relative rarity; the chorus' bright, loving recording should now be considered definitive.

Mackenzie shines brightest where the competition is toughest: His deluxe reading of Vaughan Williams' popular G minor Mass is at turns awed, jubilant and majestic, and almost every nuance of the score is explored. The Mass is also significant repertoire for the Atlantans: It's a follow-up to the ASO's Grammy-winning disc of Vaughan Williams' "A Sea Symphony," and the Mass is one of the few major choral works that chorus founder and spiritual adviser Robert Shaw never recorded.