

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chamber Choir

Copland Four Motets **Durufié** Quatre motets sur des themes gregoriens **Messiaen** O sacrum convivium! **Tavener** Song for Athene **Vaughan Williams** Mass in G minor **Tallis** O sacrum convivium

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chamber Chorus / **Norman MacKenzie** (*sic*)
Telarc @ CD80654 (55' . DDD)

Robert Shaw's successor seizes the baton



Conductors come and go but it is a brave chorusmaster who steps into the shoes of former Atlanta SO music director Robert Shaw, of whom it was said that he often treated the ASO as if it were a chorus with an orchestra attached. Norman MacKenzie's debut recording, after 14 years of working under Shaw, fulfils what one can only imagine was the elder conductor's dream: a full program of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chamber Chorus without the intrusive instrumentalists.

The program gathers a handful of composers whose main stylistic similarities (at least in these sacred works) are an affinity for old church tunes and the ability to make them breathe new life. The Copland motets fall less squarely within those parameters, fitting more smoothly in the Gallic camp of Messiaen and Durufié than the English faction of Vaughan Williams and Tavener, but even so they point out how much the composer is willing to sublimate his own voice in deference to liturgical tradition. The line between Tallis and Tavener, the sole living composer in the collection, is strong indeed.

Also strong is the sound of the chorus itself. MacKenzie is surely blessed with one of the few choruses in the world with a characteristic sound, rivaling most orchestras and indeed many soloists in its identifiable tone and phrasing. At its most extreme, this leads to a certain stylistic homogeneity, protecting that sound rather than differing between the Frenchness of a Durufié and the Englishness of a Vaughan Williams, for example. Just as in the ASO's full-bodied *Sea Symphony* recording (Telarc, A/02), no one would accuse the Mass of being overly beholden to English tradition. With this depth of musical sensitivity and connection to text, however, the results speak for themselves. **Ken Smith**