

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: *Mass in G minor*
 with works by Tallis, Duruflé, Copland, Messiaen,
 Tavener
 Atlanta Symphony Chamber Chorus/ Norman
 Mackenzie—Telarc 80654—54 minutes

In case you haven't heard it from anybody else, the choral legacy of Robert Shaw is in good hands. Upon his death in 1999, responsibility for the Atlanta Symphony's Choruses passed to Norman Mackenzie, his closest associate and protege in Atlanta—who had served as the ASO's keyboardist as well as his mentor's primary choral accompanist and assistant conductor. I'm not the only ARG critic who will tell you that this is the finest major metropolitan orchestral chorus anywhere.

The Chamber Chorus, numbering between 40 and 60 voices (the main chorus is 200 voices) has performed almost exclusively with their orchestra up to now: this is the first recording any ASO chorus has made without them. Shaw's chamber recordings were made with professional choirs, but these are volunteer singers. This recording—offering mostly well-established choral masterpieces—is a stunning release in every respect.

Mackenzie and company bring off the Vaughan Williams mass, the main fare here, with nearly unprecedented vocal richness and sacred sincerity. It sounds as if the choir is close to its 60-voice upper limit, in consideration of the music's scoring for double choir and solo quartet. Yet—just as with Shaw's choirs of yore—they achieve levels of clarity, precision, and ensemble that you would think possible only from a smaller choir. This is a very different sort of sound than you would hear from an English ensemble in this music.

And so it goes for the remaining selections. The 'O Sacrum Convivium' settings of both Thomas Tallis and Olivier Messiaen shimmer with ripe, juicy sound that also drips spiritual intensity. I was getting rather tired of John Tavener's *Song for Athene*, but this perfectly arched account revived my interest in the piece. The meticulously crafted serenity and

deep sacred emotions of Maurice Duruflé's Four Motets on Gregorian Themes find their expressive ideal here. I was never particularly impressed by Aaron Copland's Four Motets until now (early student works written as exercises during his studies with Boulanger in Paris).

These singers retain the same refinement of tone, vocal nuance, balance, and dynamics that they had under Shaw. But Mackenzie emerges as his own man, here. The difference is mainly interpretive: there's simply more feeling and depth to his readings. If Shaw had a shortcoming, it was a certain subordination of emotional content to absolute choral perfection. But Mackenzie has taken his charges to a new level of choral excellence. Having inherited the perfect instrument, he is now free to play it as he wishes.

The stereo sound is practically in a class of its own. Telarc learned how to record choral music with Shaw, and nobody does it better. Their usual complete booklet is fine.