

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

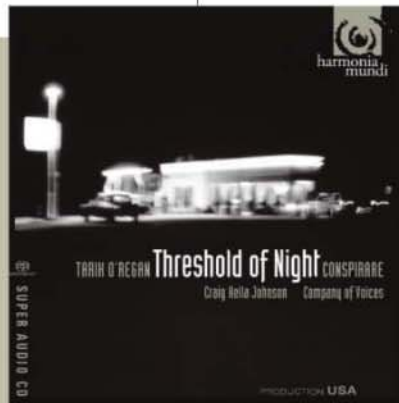
Tarik O'Regan *Threshold of Night*

Describing the music of 30-year-old British composer Tarik O'Regan, one must mention Renaissance polyphony and other contemporary composers of choral music, then put them aside. Yes, O'Regan's debts to medieval music, both direct and via Arvo Pärt, are clear; there are hints of Ivan Moody in his fondness for pure, high-flying soprano lines, and he's into layering like Veljo Tormis, though the latter composer's folk-song roots could not be further from O'Regan's sensibility. O'Regan's music is primarily tonal, and complex, with much going on at all times: vocal lines rising and falling, imitation, solo voices or duets (or, at one point, an octet) breaking out from within the choir, rhythmic motifs that repeat and repeat, a *chug-chug* throbbing that gets the heart beating, and wicked dissonances, some quickly resolved, others lingering. But it isn't a challenge to enjoy, and there's never a sense of thorniness for its own sake—it sounds simultaneously ancient and modern. Stravinsky is tougher to enjoy, and rarely reaches the levels of sheer beauty of sound that O'Regan finds almost everywhere.

O'Regan, educated at Oxford and Cambridge, moved to New York a few years ago, and, as the notes accompanying the CD tell us rather noncommittally, these works, all composed since that move, "reflect the cultural plurality of today's urban environment." This nonsensical statement meaning everything and nothing is happily followed by "Here is an art that seeks to forge a link between the spheres of 'the ecstasies above' and the harsh realities of life on earth." Translated into English, I believe that means that O'Regan's music can be alternatively beautiful and unsentimentally rough. Whatever you want to call it, it hypnotizes.

Almost every piece on the CD contemplates life, death, the afterlife, or some other bit of existentialist thinking. The title work is based on the poem by British poet and Blake scholar Kathleen Raine (1908–2003), whose own bent was spiritual and prophetic. It was written for Advent, a time of waiting and searching for guidance; coincidentally, O'Regan's composition was completed on August 29, 2006, a year to the day after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. The text has odd resonance with the anniversary: "Go back, my babe, to the rain and storm"; "I will not go back for sorrow and pain." The words "Go back, my babe," intoned over and over by the male choir in a swaying rhythm, could not be more affecting.

The disc opens and closes with settings of poems by Emily Dickinson, each about two minutes long. For this most economical of poets O'Regan does not waste a note or moment, and the complex textures, with solo soprano and



Conspirare Company of Voices, Company of Strings;
 Craig Hella Johnson, conductor
 Harmonia Mundi HMU 807490 (SACD/CD). 2008.
 Robina G. Young, prod.; John Newton, eng. DDD.
 TT: 59:31
 Performance ★★★★★
 Sonics ★★★★★

solo tenor breaking out occasionally, speak to the layers of meaning Dickinson so efficiently conjures in so few words. In *Had I Not Seen the Sun* he uses a repeated, downward motif that abruptly stops to give us the "wilderness" Dickinson speaks of. It's stunning. In *Triptych*, the first part (about death and eternity) is a manic, fast-moving combination of massed voices and strings. The second part (concerned with remembrance) begins immediately after the first, on a pure C on violins; a brief harmony enters and leaves, then a new harmony enters and moves into dissonance. At 1:26 a gorgeous, easy melody appears, and 20 seconds later a solo voice enters to alternate with the chorus over a high string drone for a couple of

minutes. The string-voice textures begin changing frequently, and a section for strings alone follows until the solo voice re-enters with the beautiful tune first heard at 1:26, before fading into nothingness. It is touching in the extreme. The third movement (about resurrection and peace) then attacks and goes full speed ahead with hurtling strings and voices, and only tiny and occasional pizzicato interruptions. It's an almost exhausting 17 minutes that you'll want to hear again immediately.

A setting of Pablo Neruda's "Tal Vez Tenemos Tiempo" (Maybe we have time) is a gentle, homophonic oasis in mid-CD; it and *Threshold of Night* are the only two vocal settings unaccompanied by strings. Edgar Allan Poe's rumination on the heavens and the angel Israfel, which O'Regan titles *The Ecstasies Above* (a phrase from the poem), is in three movements, scored alternately for full chorus or vocal octet with string quartet. It interchanges dance rhythms with long phrases, and sparse passages with full-on polyphony. *Care Charminge Sleepe*, on a text by the 17th-century poet John Fletcher, is a dense but straightforward work for double choir and strings.

The performances and sound are spectacular. The Troy Savings Bank Music Hall in Troy, New York, is a fine, warm venue for the recording, with little decay time. Conspirare Company of Voices, led by Craig Hella Johnson, is a precise, passionate, seemingly fearless vocal group, able to turn on a dime and negotiate tricky rhythms, harmonies, and intervals with the same ease as they do more straightforward, melodic moments. And kudos to the Company of Strings for their virtuoso accompaniment and solos.

If you don't know Tarik O'Regan's work, you should. He is now working on a chamber opera based on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which seems right up his compositional and temperamental alleys. And this CD is magnificent.

—Robert Levine