

Musically alive churches produce heavenly legacy

On the three days before Palm Sunday, 1989, Robert Hunter Bell led the Gallery Choir of the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in a series of recording sessions devoted to the Holy Week repertoire performed that year at what continues to be one of Toronto's most musically active churches.



Classical records

William Littler

I say continues to be because this, of course, is the late composer Healey Willan's church.

Willan's spirit, if not his music, remains very much a part of the resulting performances, which address a repertoire stretching from Palestrina, Byrd, Weelkes and

Victoria to the Canadian composer Graham George, whose hymn "Ride On! Ride On In Majesty!" brings into play the Healey Willan Memorial Organ.

Because St. Mary Magdalene happens to be located at a busy residential intersection, some extraneous noises intrude from time to time, but in his accompanying notes, maestro Bell persuasively defends the value of recording in that venue in order to benefit from its special acoustical ambience.

The cassette recording, titled *Music For Palm Sunday And Easter*, can be obtained directly from the church and is otherwise only selectively available.

Another Toronto house of worship with a musically active ministry is St. James Cathedral, where a 40-voice choir from Massachusetts made its successful local debut last month.

Founded in 1975 and appearing under its present name since 1988, *Gloriae Dei Cantores* (Singers To The Glory Of God) makes its home in Orleans, where it performs weekly at traditional Anglican/Episcopal services.

Its singing standard nevertheless belies its small-town origins and on a recent compact disc titled *Easter Day Mass* (distributed by Paraclete Press), Elizabeth Patterson's choristers amply demonstrate why their recent tour took them to such sophisticated musical centres as Boston, New York and Washington.

In addition to a short *Recercar* by Frescobaldi, the album focuses on Palestrina's *Missa Aeterna Christi Munera* (Mass For The Feast Of St. John, Apostle And Evangelist) and Jean Langlais' *Easter Day Mass*, both of which are performed by a choir worth welcoming at any time of year.

Bach, of course, wrote religious

music for all times of the year but some of these scores are much better known than others. Among those in the neglected category are the Latin masses from his Leipzig years, designed for Lutheran service.

A new *Virgin Classics* album, with the Chorus and Orchestra of the Collegium Vocale under Philippe Herreweghe's direction, reasserts the merits of the *Masses In A Major, BWV 234* and *G Minor, BWV 235*, along with the *Sanctus In D Major, BWV 238*. And if Herreweghe and company do not entirely refute Spitta, Bach's great biographer, who accused the composer of reusing earlier material here with less sensitivity to text, they offer proof that good ideas deserve an ongoing life.

The contention that these shortened Lutheran masses represented draft studies for the *B Minor Mass* remains speculative, but anyone in search of a masterful recording of that masterpiece needs look no further than an outstanding Telarc compact disc with Robert Shaw conducting the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus.

Sylvia McNair, Delores Ziegler, Marietta Simpson, John Aler, William Stone and Thomas Paul are the soloists and Shaw integrates them all into one of the most cogently argued Bach interpretations currently in the catalogues. Not for period instrument purists, certainly, but definitely a performance for those who like their Bach deeply felt.

Another Telarc album finds Shaw in comparably fine form leading the Robert Shaw Festival Singers in the *Rachmaninov Vespers*. Drawn from top-flight vocalists who gather each summer for the master conductor's Emory Institute in Quercy, France, this is a choir one might well envision serving a night-long service in a Russian monastery of the imagination. Reality can seldom have been so glorious.

But if the booming sounds of Russian basses are not to your ecclesiastical liking, how about the angelic warbling of English trebles? They can be found on a splendid recent Nimbus recording of music by the early 17th century composer Thomas Weelkes.

Devoted to the *Ninth Service*, an evening service for five voices and a pair of anthems, the album features the superb singing of the Christ Church Cathedral Choir, conducted by Stephen Darlington and recorded in the properly resonant environment of Dorchester Abbey, Oxfordshire.

Weelkes may not have been a word-setter or contrapuntist to rank alongside Byrd and Gibbons, but his rhythmic, harmonic and textural innovations make him one of the freshest-sounding notesmiths of his period.