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**SCHÜTZ Kleine geistliche Konzerte, SWV 282-337** • Manfred Cordes, dir;  
Weser-Renaissance Bremen • cpo 999675-2 3 CDs: 195:34 )

Heinrich Schütz's two books of little sacred concertos were published in 1636 and 1639, during the depths of the Thirty Years' War, as their limited performing means suggests. We have had two complete recordings of the pair of books. Wilhelm Ehmann filled up six LPs on Bärenreiter (Nonesuch and Musical Heritage Society over here) in 1963-65, while Gerhard Schmidt-Gaden took three CDs on Capriccio in 1987-90 (13:6 and 17:1). These three new CDs (sold for the price of two, be it noted) were made in only two and a half weeks last year. Cordes has shaved 12 minutes off the timing of Schmidt-Gaden (Ehmann's four-hour timing, on the other extreme, required four CDs on the Cantate reissue). Yet all three sets are basically similar in the use of solo voices with instruments; Schmidt-Gaden, of course, uses boys and men, the other two mixed adult voices.

Following the *Cantiones Sacrae* (20:5) and *Geistliche Chormusik* (22:3), this is the third complete book of Schütz's music sung by Cordes's group, not counting a valuable collection of odds and ends (21:6). At this rate, he may surpass several other conductors who have set out along the same route. He uses fine voices that are responsive to his conceptions. Unlike in his Chormusik set, he performs the works in their published order. But as in that set his tempos are on the fast side, a development that is evident in many recent recordings of Schütz's music. How much is this a commonplace of early-music performance, and how much the result of greater ease in coping with music that is becoming more familiar than it ever was? If you bought the three single Capriccio discs, you don't need to replace them. If you have just come into the market for this musical subtlety, I urge you to go for Cordes. **J. F. Weber**

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## **Schütz Kleine geistliche Konzerte - Gramophone Review**

Careful interpretations of subtle and restrained [piece] pieces: sometimes too careful but worth investigating none the less

**Author:**  
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## Schütz Kleine geistliche Konzerte

Weser-Renaissance Bremen's association with Schütz has already yielded a fine recording of the complete Geistliche Chormusik of 1648. A decade earlier, the composer had published two collections of sacred chamber 'concertos' of smaller dimensions, his response to straightened circumstances at the Saxon court during the Thirty Years' War. Musically it responds to the new, declamatory vocal style that Schütz encountered on his second trip to Venice. He combines it with the through-composed, imitative style of his early years in a blend of genres that are uniquely personal and involving.

The two collections include a few pieces for up to five singers, and some with obbligato instruments (Ein Kind ist uns geboren, or the large-scale Ich hab mein Sach that concludes the first book), but the majority is for solo singers or duos (plus the mandatory continuo). There are also a few Latin-texted pieces, the remnants, perhaps, of a self-contained publication which had to be abandoned for financial reasons; but mostly the texts are German versions of the Old and New Testaments (some have texts in common with, and are musically similar to, the Musikalische Exequien of 1636).

Schütz largely steers clear of the chromatic luxuriance typical of many of his Italian models, adopting it only when the text positively cries out for it (try Was hast du verwirket II). He also avoids overtly vocal pyrotechnics: the emphasis really is on communicating the text subtly and effectively. These pieces reveal their art discreetly to an attentive listener. Don't expect to be hit between the eyes: this is chamber music in both feel and fact. Another necessary observation is that Schütz's audience wouldn't have expected to hear many of these pieces together at one sitting, let alone the three hours' music on offer here. So this huge set is best savoured in small batches. The current catalogue lists no other complete recording, and the cost (mid-price, effectively) should put it within reach of most collectors.

Self-recommending though they surely are, the interpretations are not quite as convincing as those of Cordes's previous set. Part of the problem is technical: intonation and support, especially in the high voices, can sometimes falter (singing in thirds is a regular niggle), and I suspect that a lower pitch-standard might in some cases have helped put matters right. More puzzling is the reluctance on the part of all concerned to ornament beyond what Schütz himself prescribes. We know that the composer was keen to recruit native Italian singers for the Elector's chapel. If a more 'German' reserve is intended (in line with Schütz's measured attitude to virtuosity), I am not sure whether the concern is warranted. In any case, I can remember recordings from as long ago as the 1970s (those on the Nonesuch label spring to mind) where the singers took a noticeably

freer attitude to such matters, and although many things since then have changed for the better, I sometimes miss the spirit that animated those old performances.

Not everything in this new set quite catches fire, or communicates the text in the dramatic way that is the *raison d'être* of this music. But there is much splendid singing here, as well as (obviously) glorious music. I prefer to note that repeated listening has only increased my enjoyment of these discs. That says it all!

**SCHÜTZ Geistliche Chormusik, SWV 369-397** • Gerhard Schmidt-Gaden, cond; Tölzer Knabenchor; Musicalische Compagnie • CAPRICCIO 10858-59 2 CDs: 105:03 )

If eight complete recordings of this great book of German motets are any indication, the publication of 1648 must be Heinrich Schütz's greatest collection. To be sure, half a dozen longer works, such as his passions and oratorios, have had even more attention over the years, but among the published books of shorter pieces none has had this much coverage. Most of these motets are mature works, but two have survived in earlier versions, another is known to have been performed as early as 1617, and *Der Engel sprach* is simply a German version of Andrea Gabrieli 's *Angelus ad pastures*.

But the competing interpretations are varied enough for a month of comparisons. We have heard large choirs, small choirs, and soloist ensembles. The *a cappella* performances contrast with the use of instruments, but instrumental ensembles of varied sizes and distribution have been involved. One can even listen straight through in published order, starting with solo-soprano pieces and working up to the most complex settings, or hear the selections arranged with contrasting forces in succession.

This splendid presentation offers boys and men with a choir of 25, but nine of the members apparently sing only solo parts. The instruments of Musicalische Compagnie are used not just in obligato parts but in every piece, and here the greatest variety of usage is employed. The notes indicate clearly which pieces are performed with voices and continuo, voices doubled by instruments, or several other contrasting arrangements. The published order is followed, but the variety of instrumentation affords some contrast.

The Tölz Boys' Choir has been singing under its founder for over four decades. I like its sound better now than I did in the early days, for it combines a virtuosic vocal production with a better blending of tone than was once the case. A decade ago it gave us both books of *Kleine Geistliche Konzerte*, a set that I found most impressive. Now it offers strong competition for Manfred Cordes, who eschews the published order for a sense of contrast, and uses instruments with a different

sense of suitability. In this set Holger Eichhorn, the director of the ensemble, has devoted a lot of thought to the most appropriate distribution of instruments for each motet. It's a very convincing approach, laid out in detail in his notes. If you're just now looking for this masterpiece, look no further than this new issue. **J. F. Weber**

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