

## **Old Christmas Returned: Christmas celebrated, banned and restored in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England**

PASSAMEZZO PM 1507

www.passamezzo.co.uk

Those familiar with Passamezzo's performances will know that the group provides more than just a concert: rather an experience which dramatises the topic in hand and captures the emotional upheavals of those living through them. None are more striking than the events of the mid-seventeenth century, when for a time the Puritan ethic replaced the status quo and Christmas was banned. The director Tamsin Lewis's particular knowledge and expertise in the field of music experienced by the ordinary populace is brought to bear in this highly diverse selection of pieces, which also includes some of the art music as it might have been performed in the houses of the aristocracy.

A recording cannot entirely reproduce the drama of Passamezzo's live performances, but this one comes close. The very fetching picture of the group included in the leaflet would not be out of place in the works of Georges de la Tour, and is a reminder not only of Passamezzo's efforts to create a sympathetic aura, but of their attention to historical accuracy in their presentations. The programme is devised as 'a journey through the days of Christmas as it was celebrated in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England', beginning in Advent and ending at Candlemas (2<sup>nd</sup> February).

Feasting and dancing are constant themes of the secular pieces and both feature in the opening item, which conveys anticipation of Christmas to come. But it is a quiet beauty that pervades the next four pieces, which include familiar verses by George Wither and Alexander Wedderburn, and settings by Orlando Gibbons and John Attey. Michael Palmer splendidly declaims William Drummond's 'Run, shepherds, run', which is followed by an unfamiliar carol from the 1534 *Shearmen and Taylors' Pageant*, rather than the ubiquitous Coventry Carol familiar to all.

Christmas having arrived, so too does the food and the dancing, and for a time the music becomes more rustic. Then follows a sequence of carols taking us through the various landmark days: St Stephen, St John, Holy Innocents, New Year, Twelfth Night, and finally Candlemas. Apart from ballad settings we hear attractive post-Restoration music by Robert Smith, Henry Purcell, Henry Lawes, and Thomas Farmer, beautifully sung by Eleanor Cramer, and sympathetically accompanied in a variety of ways. The 1623 setting of the *Nunc Dimittis* from George Wither's collection of *Hymnes and Songs of the Church* expresses the sadness felt when celebrations are over for another year and work must recommence.

The final pieces on the disc are devoted to the banishment and restoration of Christmas in the mid-seventeenth century. 'The World turn'd upside down' is set to the subversive ballad 'When the King enjoys his own again', noting that 'Christmas was kill'd at Naseby fight'. The theme continues in the next pieces, although not without raucous rebellion, and a neat re-working of the hue and cry for a lame mare, so familiar in the settings of various street 'cries', now addressed to the search for 'an old, old, very old, grey-bearded Gentleman called Christmas'.

However, the dissolution of the Rump Parliament in 1660 soon led to the restitution of Christmas and – so the ballads tell us – all the trimmings:

*to pass the cold winter away with delight  
We feast it all day; and we frolic at night.*

This is a delightful programme, performed with enthusiasm and expertise by a talented group of seven performers, each of whom assumes various roles. The chronology of the festivities gives the programme a fine structure and is married to effective contrasts between sacred and secular pieces, some composed and others improvised around ballad tunes. I highly recommend it.

ANDREW ASHBEE