



CALMUS CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Christmas carols & songs arranged by **Bob Chilcott, Philip Lawson, Ludwig Böhme, Max Reger, others**
Calmus Ensemble Leipzig

Carus- 83.432(CD)

No Reference Recording

Artistic Quality **9/10** *Sound Quality*

They've certainly heard this before from other observers, but it's impossible to hear the sound--not to mention many of the arrangements--of the five-member Calmus Ensemble Leipzig and not be reminded of the extraordinary British ensemble the King's Singers. While the King's Singers are six men and Calmus is composed of four men and a woman, they treat us to the same cleanly articulated, clear-voiced, perfectly balanced ensemble singing, every note, every chord given exacting importance, delivered in the most vocally attractive, musically expressive style.

There's joy aplenty here, and lots of spirited singing, especially in the arrangements of Nova! nova! (by Bob Chilcott, former King's Singer and frequent musical contributor to that group) and Gaudete! (by Calmus baritone Ludwig Böhme, who provides six of the program's 19 selections, including a scintillating dash through the snow in Jingle bells!). Another King's Singers connection comes with (current member) Philip Lawson's Hark! the herald angels sing, styled with his usual harmonic inventiveness, giving a fresh, modern-ish cast to this familiar Christmas hymn. There are German carols (among them a lovely Stille Nacht and Es ist ein Ros entsprungen, the latter arranged by Calmus countertenor Sebastian Krause) and a beautiful rendition of Max Reger's setting of the lullaby Schlaf, mein Kindelein (a highlight of the disc).

Not so lovely--and the one "bummer" on this otherwise super program--is the Calmus Ensemble's attempt at who-knows-what kind of stylish presentation of Thank God it's Christmas, a song written and recorded 25 years ago by the British pop group Queen. It's not so much Böhme's square-ish arrangement but the weird, twangy, swoopy vocalizing that makes this track one to skip. Someone should have had the sense to delete this song before it left the editing room. Some listeners (this one included) also may find the Finnish song Sylvian Joululaulu a bit long and the arrangement a bit messy, but at least it's sung with the group's usual agreeable tone and impeccable blend. And those are among the strong reasons why you will enjoy this upbeat and thankfully different Christmas program, full of new or rarely heard arrangements, recorded in a fairly close but vibrant studio acoustic. Recommended. [11/20/2009]

--David Vernier