



'Internal Flames and Celestial Blaze': the award-winning early music ensemble Capella de la Torre record an exhilarating album of 'Fire Music'

Sampson and Middleton are very much at home in this repertoire, frequently functioning as an indivisible unit with sound and sense beautifully fused. Occasionally – in the opening 'En sourdine' from *Fêtes galantes*, for instance – Sampson lets consonants slip in a quest for dynamic shading, though elsewhere texts are scrupulously delivered. She's in excellent voice, too, her tone clear and silvery, her upper registers exquisite: Chausson's 'Apaisement' sends shivers down your spine with its floated high *pianissimos* and suggestive portamentos.

The subtlety of Verlaine's poetry – in which inner emotion and external reality are in continuous if fragile accord – encouraged song composers to expand the range of their piano-writing, and Middleton's playing is marvellously fresh throughout, the thin dividing line between wit and melancholy superbly negotiated. When it comes to *La bonne chanson*, I prefer the more forthright approach of Gérard Souzay, say, or the underrated Camille Maurane, to Sampson and Middleton's reined-in interpretation, fascinating though it is. *Ariettes oubliées*, on the other hand, gets one its finest performances on disc, the slide from eroticism to bitterness immaculately judged. Very fine.

Tim Ashley

'Winter'

Alexander/Wilson Come wander with me
Arnalds/Arnarson For now I am winter
Bingham The darkness is no darkness R Dale
Winter Gjeilo In the bleak midwinter Pärt Nunc
 dimittis Pott Balulalow Rachmaninov Nunc
 dimittis Sandström Es ist ein Ros entsprungen
Traditional The snow it melts the soonest Vasks
 The Fruit of Silence. *Plainscapes*
Voces8 with Mari Samuelsen vn Benjamin
 Roskams va Håkon Samuelsen, Stephanie Oade
 vcs Eleanor Turner hp Huw Watkins pl/celesta
 Decca © 483 0968DH (65' • DDD)



Since its foundation in 2005 the British ensemble Voces8 has drawn glowing plaudits for the impeccable quality of its balance and tone, the versatility of its programming and its far-reaching educational workshops. In addition to a busy international touring schedule there is now a third 'themed' album for Decca, billed as 'a powerful aural portrait of winter...an immersive sonic landscape'. Naturally the composers hail predominantly from northern latitudes, including Estonia, Latvia, Iceland, Russia and England.

The centrepiece is a stunning performance of Pēteris Vasks's *Plainscapes*, three wordless linked movements, composed in 2002, and infused with a strong Pärtian flavour, with important roles for violin and cello, played here with tremendous verve by Norwegian siblings Mari and Håkon Samuelsen. This rendition is even more impressive than the Latvian Radio Choir's recording under Sigvards Klāva for Ondine in 2012, especially in the final section, when a cinematically vivid aviary bursts into life, complete with birdcalls, string harmonics and suchlike.

The rest of the programme is of predominantly slow and smooth music, though all of the greatest interest. Francis Pott's perfectly poised *Balulalow* bears many repeated hearings, as does Judith Bingham's *The darkness is no darkness*, with its hints of late Vaughan Williams. Voces8's composer-in-residence Ola Gjeilo offers a radically reharmonised revamp of Holst's *In the bleak midwinter*, and there are three delicious arrangements by Geoff Lawson, the finest of which is *Come wander with me*, first heard in the film *The Twilight Zone* in 1954.

Finest of all, though, is Rebecca Dale's specially commissioned title-track, *Winter*. With mulled wine and a slice of Stollen to hand, this warming masterpiece will definitely see me through any hivernal hardship. Malcolm Riley