


GRIEG *Album for Male Voices*, op. 30. *Children's Songs*, op. 61. *Elegiac Melodies: Last Spring*. *Peer Gynt: O blessed morning*. *Ave maris stella*. *Psalms*, op. 74 • Carl Høgset, cond; Magnus Staveland (ten); Grex Vocalis • 2L 45 (Hybrid multichannel SACD: 70:50 )

It is still Grieg year as I write, and the airwaves, if not the concert halls, are filled with endless versions of the *Holberg Suite*, the *Lyric Pieces*, and the occasional song. Not much of the piano concerto, oddly enough, and almost nothing of the contents of this disc.

Grieg wrote a fair amount of choral music, most of which is rarely heard outside of Scandinavia. The *Album for Male Voices* was written in 1878 as “contrast and relaxation,” as he said, from the composition of the string quartet the previous year. They use mostly folk texts and melodies, including one of nonsense words, and usually have a soloist, as well. The seven *Children's Songs* were written in 1898, with their arrangement for high voices coming in 1901. All but one of their texts are by well-known Norwegian poets. Grieg did not consider that these sets formed cycles and here the two collections are interspersed, which makes this a *capella* program easier to listen to straight through.

The “Last Spring” started life as a song with words in New Norwegian (in which language Grieg became somewhat interested in the 1880s) and it also exists as an orchestral piece. This choral arrangement is by Thomas Beck. “O blessed morning” was originally written for Ibsen’s play, *Peer Gynt* (1874–75), where it came at the end, just before Solveig’s final song. *Ave maris stella* (1893/98) was written first as a song with Danish words and later rethought as an eight-part chorus. The four *Psalms* appeared after Grieg’s death in 1907 and are probably his last compositions. They require a reasonably good choir and a soloist and are among the few religious texts Grieg used.

Grex Vocalis numbers 47 singers, and for a group that large the sound is wonderfully transparent. Its size allows it to make elegant pianissimos and still keep the tone alive. I hesitate to call it particularly Scandinavian, but the sound resembles that of many Northern choirs. This clarity is especially effective in ops. 30 and 61, and in *Ave maris stella*, sung here in Latin.

The one disappointment of these performances comes, curiously, in the four *Psalms*. There are two problems. One is that the tempos are so slow as to sap the energy needed to put the message across; there is no urgency here. The conductor keeps such tight control of the sound that he has nothing to let loose when he needs some emotional color. A second problem is that these pieces normally have a baritone soloist, here replaced by a tenor who gets through the notes but does not leave much behind. The only current alternative to the men’s choruses of op. 30 is by Die Singphoniker on cpo, who also offer the fourth *Psalm*. This ensemble consists of six men who, by that fact, give an entirely different view of the set. There seems to be no current CD recording of the rest of the pieces or of all four *psalms*. **Alan Swanson**



Edvard Grieg: Choral Music
AUDIO CD; HYBRID SACD
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