
This collection of the poems of Catullus, Horace, Phaedrus, Martial, Caesar, the *Carmina Burana*, and the *Nautarum Carmen* set to music comes in three components and includes: music for voice and piano, a booklet with the Latin librettos and English translations (taken from the Loeb Classical Library and Lynn Sebesta, University of South Dakota), and an audio cassette of the songs sung by the members of Voces Latinae, the choir that Czech-born composer Jan Novák (1921-1984) founded in Roverto, Italy, for the performance of his musical adaptations.

Novák originally came from Moravia but moved to America to study under fellow Czech Bohuslav Martinu (famous for his Oratorios The *Greek Passion* and a setting of the Mesopotamian epic *Gilgamesh*), and Aron Copland during 1947/8. He then returned home until the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. He spent the rest of his life composing in various countries around Europe until his death in 1984. From the late 1950s onwards Novák concentrated on Latin language and literature; setting the authors of Classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to music. Novák strove to keep the metrical patterns and syllabic quantities of the original authors intact. This is not my area of expertise and it will have to be up to the listener and those better qualified in Latin prosody to judge.

The major works of Novák are the *Horatii Carmina* (1959), the *Dulces Cantilenae* (1961), the *Passer Catulli* (1963), and his Latin masterpiece the Vergil cantata *Dido* (1967). As the introduction points out, the songs in this collection (taken from various compositions 1959-1963) are a small part of the composer Novák’s entire musical corpus, and the unstated intention of this publication is presumably to provide an introduction to his compositional output.

The songs on the audio cassette, where the curious will first turn, are arranged for choir and synthesised band although the sheet music provided is for the original solo voice and piano arrangement. Since Novák himself founded the choir performing the songs their delivery is undoubtedly
authoritative but it makes following the score somewhat pointless. Also, the songs on the tape and those in the vocal score are in a different order, and the two songs from the *Carmina Burana* are also not included in the vocal score at all.

The songs themselves have to be judged individually, as they are from different song cycles. One thing to note is that these are not an attempt at Classical Latin songs but contemporary setting of Classical Latin texts.

The introduction describes the character of the songs as a combination of pop and jazz and indeed this is borne out by a listening. They seem reminiscent of Ennio Morricone’s film scores.

The first thing that struck me was that these were approachable songs and able to be listened to without any fear of ‘modern composition’. Yet these are not grand compositions; some would even say that they are twee. Depending on interpretation they are either all written with a sense of fun, or they are whimsical and not worthy of the texts they are set to. All the songs are quite short, simple, and inoffensively pleasant and you might even whistle one or two tunes. Yet the synthesiser and drum accompaniment begins to grate after a while.

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