

CHORALIS CONSTANTINUS 1508

HEINRICH ISAAC IN KONSTANZ

REVIEWED BY TOBIN SPARFELD

Conductor, USA

ONE MIGHT EXPECT THAT A CLASSICAL ALBUM FEATURING NUMEROUS WORLD PREMIERE RECORDINGS WOULD ONLY CONTAIN MUSIC WRITTEN RECENTLY. THIS RECORDING OF MOTETS FROM HEINRICH ISAAC'S CHORALIS CONSTANTINUS, HOWEVER, PREMIERES WORKS PUBLISHED OVER 500 YEARS AGO.

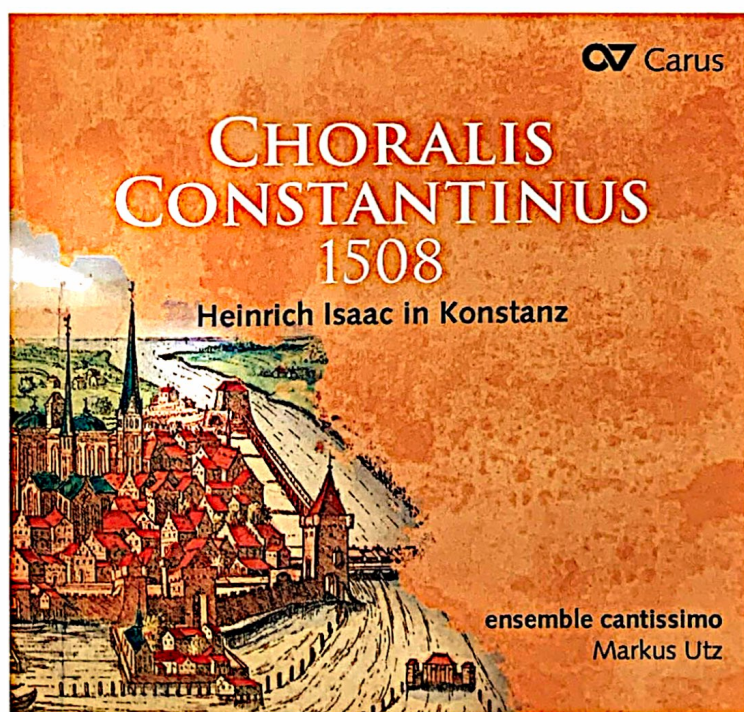
Franco-Flemish composer Heinrich Isaac (1450–1517) was one of the most prolific composers of the Renaissance, producing a range of diverse music, including: instrumental music, masses, motets, and part songs in Italian, German, and French. His best known work may be the song "Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen."

Though little biographical information remains of Isaac, his reputation amongst his contemporaries must have been substantial since Lorenzo de Medici invited him from Innsbruck to Florence in 1484, joining other Florentine artistic figures such as da Vinci, Botticelli, and Michelangelo. During this time he became a Florentine citizen, married a Florentine, and settled in Italy.

In 1496 Isaac moved to Vienna and was commissioned by Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, in whose employment he would remain until his death. During this time he composed and collected over 375 Gregorian-chant based polyphonic motets which were delivered to Constance Cathedral in late 1508 and early 1509. Though not published until 1550-1555 after his death, the motets remain some of the finest examples of chant-based Renaissance polyphony in existence. This posthumous publication, however, meant that the works only came to light during the Catholic Reformation, spearheaded by the Council of Trent. As such, some of the more interesting works were deemed unsuitable for liturgical use. The ranges of the motets, which are more like works for STTB voices than SATB, may also explain why they have received relatively little attention.

This recording is a collection of eighteen motets from Volume II of the Choralis Constantinus, and includes the motets commissioned specifically for Constance Cathedral in 1508. Of the eighteen selections, thirteen are world premiere recordings.

Founded in 1994, *ensemble cantissimo* features elite singers from Switzerland and Germany and specializes in previously unheard choral repertoire. The ensemble was founded by conductor Markus Utz who is also an organist and pedagogue. He has served as Professor of Choral Conducting at Zurich University of the Arts since 2007 and has led the twelve-voice ensemble in this recording, which took place in July 2021. Fittingly, the recording site was on the island of Reichenau in the middle of Lake Constance. The motets on the recording are organized by liturgical calendar: Christmas, devotional texts to Mary, Easter, Pentecost, and the Feast of St. Conrad. Typically in this volume, the motets for a particular feast day were grouped into Introit, Alleluia, Sequence, and Communion. The sequences



are usually the longest and feature the most complicated imitation of the chant melody.

Highlights of the recording include: the opening *Puer natus*, which features a brilliant four-part imitation of the chant melody in sections; the biting dissonances at the end of the *Haec dies*; the novel meter change in the middle of *Dominus in sina*; and the exciting imitated melody introduced by the soprano voice in the *Spiritus Domini*. Some of the motets are a cappella, while others are doubled by sackbuts and cornetts. While intonation and the vocal quality of the singers is strong, diction is harder to hear in the instrumental movements, and the voices retreat slightly into the reverberation of the church sanctuary.

As many of these selections are within reach for many choral ensembles, this recording is recommended for anyone seeking accessible Renaissance literature in addition to connoisseurs of exquisite Renaissance music. Since the works are of a consistent nature, the album transports the listener through Isaac's motets of careful consonance and sublime imitation. Conductor Markus Utz and his *ensemble cantissimo* deserve congratulations for bringing these yet unheard recordings to our ears.

Edited by Sam Hemsworth, USA

FRANK LA ROCCA MASS OF THE AMERICAS

REVIEWED BY TOBIN SPARFELD

Conductor, USA

THE BENEDICT SIXTEEN CHOIR HAS RECENTLY RELEASED A RECORDING FEATURING THE WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING OF FRANK LA ROCCA'S MASS OF THE AMERICAS. RECORDED IN JANUARY 2022, THE WORK WAS COMMISSIONED IN 2018 BY THE BENEDICT XVI INSTITUTE FOR SACRED MUSIC AND DIVINE WORSHIP TO BE A MASS INCORPORATING TRADITIONAL MEXICAN MELODIES, IN THE MANNER OF RENAISSANCE PARAPHRASE MASSES, ESPECIALLY THE MEXICAN FOLK SONG *LA GUADALUPANA*. THIS SOLEMN MASS IS AN INTERESTING PIECE BOTH AS A LITURGICAL WORK AS WELL AS IN SECULAR PERFORMANCE SETTINGS.

American composer Frank La Rocca (b. 1951) set the Mass for choir, organ, percussion, guitar, and string ensemble. While most of the settings are in Latin, there are also portions in Spanish as well as Nahuatl, a native language of central Mexico.

The Benedict Sixteen Choir is a sixteen-voice SATB ensemble in the greater San Francisco Bay area and was founded in recent years by conductor Richard Sparks. Sparks has an impressive career in both professional and academic worlds. He founded Seattle Pro Musica in 1973 and has guest conducted numerous professional ensembles, including the Swedish Radio Choir, Santa Fe Desert Chorale, and the Vocal Arts Ensemble of Cincinnati. His doctoral dissertation won ACDA's Julius Herford Award, and he served as Director of Choral Activities at Pacific Lutheran University and is Professor Emeritus at the University of North Texas.

The Mass for the Americas brings together popular Hispanic carols and pious songs with high classical musical styles. Preceding the Mass ordinary is *El Cantico del Alba*, a traditional Mexican folk melody simply arranged by La Rocca in the style of a processional. Accompanied first by a single-tone chime, the unison melody branches out into two parts sung by soprano and alto voices. Tenor and bass voices enter in two parts and are accompanied by strings and organ.

La Rocca's composition largely relies on a traditional harmonic language. While there are passages that contain more modern dissonances, they never intrude upon the underlying consonant foundation. The instrumental texture is led by organ and strings, with percussion instruments providing timbral color as opposed to metric reinforcement.

One of the most notable movements of the Mass is the offertory *Ave Maria*. La Rocca sets the text at two different points in the Mass, one in Latin and the