

CD REVIEW LOVE NEVER ENDS /SACRED SOUNDS - ELISABETH VON TRAPP

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Both as a music lover and a Christian pastor, I am enthralled by the beauty and prayerfulness of Elisabeth von Trapp's newest recording, *Love Never Ends*. Some of the music I find familiar and some of it, however ancient chronologically, is new to me. But in this recording it is all new and accessible to everyone who appreciates beauty in all forms of music. The entire album thrills me and comforts me at the same time, which may sound like a contradiction in terms but most definitely is not.

The range of both texts and music is great. Chronologically, the music begins with a 12th century mystic, Hildegard von Bingen, whose Christian musical style was pre-empted in our time by the New Age Movement until Elisabeth restored it to its Christian origins. Textually, Elisabeth's collection begins with the Old Testament but also includes the *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of medieval Celtic prayers which existed in both pagan and Christian forms. Elisabeth emphasizes the Christian Carmina in her adaptation of the music of Mary Truly Ermev in the opening piece, "I will Kindle My Fire."

The music progresses from the medieval to African American spirituals and gospel songs, with Orlando Gibbons, William Billings, Mozart and Ralph Vaughan Williams in between. There is delightful original music by Elisabeth, who throughout the CD adapts each piece so beautifully to a contemporary worshipful atmosphere of praise.

Elisabeth's original music consists of settings of Biblical texts. In "*In the Morning*," based on several Old Testament texts, Elisabeth harmonizes with herself to the accompaniment of two guitars, her own and Paul Asbell's, in a ravishingly simple and beautiful way. But my favorite is the title song for the whole CD, "*Love Never Ends*," Elisabeth's setting of St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13. In my years of pastoral ministry, this text has been the Scripture most frequently requested by couples for their weddings, and (surprisingly to me) one of the most frequently requested by grieving families for the funerals of their loved ones.

In the future I shall always play Elisabeth's recording for the people as part of preparing for the services and ask if they would like me to play the recording rather than simply reading the text at the service itself. I know that the response will be overwhelmingly favorable because of the sheer beauty and depth of Elisabeth's setting of Paul's comforting words.

I first came to love the William Billings piece, "*When Jesus Wept*," when I heard William Schuman's adaptation of it as the slow movement of his New England Triptych. Elisabeth's version with percussion adds a whole new dimension to my appreciation of the piece. Schuman used a smaller orchestra for the middle movement than for the outer pieces, but kept one percussion instrument, the tenor drum, in his small orchestra. It sounds to me as if the tenor drum is the principal instrument that Stuart Paton is using in Elisabeth's version.

Elisabeth's rendition of "*Deep River*" strikes a special note in my heart. I was never deeply affected by traditional African American spirituals until I sang in the chorus with the Baltimore Symphony in Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, conducted by the composer in the 1960s. Tippett included several traditionally harmonized

spirituals in his work to contrast with the more dissonant music of the rest of the work. During rehearsal Tippett said that the spirituals were the best twentieth-century counterpart he could find to Bach's Lutheran chorales. As a Lutheran pastor I, of course, love Bach's chorales. *A Child of Our Time* concluded with "*Deep River*," for soloists and chorus. I was deeply moved then and so I am by Elisabeth's version, which combines her elegant voice with Kory's cello and John Rivers' acoustic bass.

Elisabeth's "*Comfort Ye My People*," from Isaiah 40, is a wonderful new treatment of this text, unequaled since Handel wrote the opening tenor recitative and aria, and the glorious first chorus of *Messiah*. Elisabeth does not use Handel's music, but rather a piece composed in the sixteenth-century by Claude Goudimel, who was previously unknown to me. Elisabeth translates it into elegant simplicity with her pure soprano, occasionally multi-recorded, and her guitar, accompanied by a delicate cello played by Erich Kory and subtle percussion by Stuart Paton.

Kory's cello dances in the American folk hymn *Jerusalem, My Happy Home*. Throughout the whole CD Kory reveals the versatility of his instrument in a manner equal to that of Yo Yo Ma. Next to the guitar, the cello is the most versatile of all stringed instruments, mostly because of its extremely broad range from high treble to low bass. A cello soloist or chamber player is the only instrumentalist I know of who has to be able to read no fewer than the three clefs (treble, tenor and bass) and switch among them frequently. Kory's skillful playing provides a subtle accompaniment to Elisabeth's voice and guitar. I have tried to figure out how many recordings Kory needed to record all the parts of his haunting contribution to *Ave Maria*. At least two, because I hear arco and pizzicato simultaneously.

I am as thrilled by Elisabeth's adaptation of Mozart's "*Ave Verum Corpus*" as I was with her rendering of Schubert's "*An die Musik*" on her previous CD, *Poetic License*. Her Austrian heritage shines through in all the best of that great musical tradition. And much of Elisabeth's beautiful vocal work reminds me of my favorite album by a country music singer, the lovely Christmas collection *Good News* by one of the sublime artists in that genre, Kathy Mattea, whose lead guitarist for a short while was my wife Lynda's guitar teacher John Mock.

"*Be Not Afraid*," the second piece on Elisabeth's CD, is one of Lynda's favorites. She has sung it at Mass many times along with many other pieces from the St. Louis Jesuits. I am delighted especially by Elisabeth's version because it includes a tenor saxophone obbligato played by Chris Peterman. The tenor sax is my own instrument, which I played at Poultney High School and at Middlebury College, both in Vermont. Lynda has also enjoyed singing music by my classmate and friend Carey Landry. So on a future CD I would love to hear Elisabeth record some of Carey's music. She would do magnificent versions of Carey's *Abba*, *Father*; *By Name I Have Called You*; and *Hail Mary, Gentle Woman*.

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