



**Kingdom of Heaven:  
Music by Heinrich  
Laufenberg**

Ensemble Dragma  
(Jane Achtman, Agnieszka  
Budzińska-Bennett,  
Marc Lewon)  
Ramée RAM 1402

Heinrich Laufenberg (c.1390–1460) is not particularly a household name, and for good, if sad, reason. Most of the composer's works were housed in the municipal library of Strasbourg, France, which was destroyed in an 1870 fire during a bombardment in the Franco-Prussian War. However, as Marc Lewon explains in liner notes, several scholars had taken copious notes of Laufenberg's works, including an almost complete textual edition of his songs, and these survived the war intact. While the words were preserved, most of the melodies were not; it is unclear how many of the songs were even originally documented with musical material. This album is an attempt to reconstruct a select few of Laufenberg's works, which consisted of everything from original pieces to German translations or *contrafacta* of Latin hymns. Such a reconstruction is fraught with issues, as the 19th-century notes taken on Laufenberg's works are ambiguous at best. As such, the ensemble has attempted here to provide, in their words, "a fitting marriage between the words and the music," aiming not for definitive solutions but for idiomatically appropriate possibilities for eight of Laufenberg's pieces. These are alternated on the recording with works from Laufenberg's time, including popular religious compositions and *contrafacta*, as well as a selection of instrumental pieces. In the latter category, the ensemble has included a complete first recording of the five pieces from the *Wolfenbüttel Lute Tablature* fragment, as reconstructed and performed by Lewon. Vocalist-harpist Agnieszka Budzińska-Bennett provides a lovely sense of gesture and rhetoric, while the instrumental accompaniment never overshadows the vocal lines. Lewon's plectrum lute selections are real standouts, as are the three selections in which he joins Budzińska-Bennett. The CD is highly recommended both for its musicality and for its historical value.

—Karen Cook



**RumBarroco: Latin-  
Baroque Fusion**

Laury Gutiérrez, director  
La Donna Musicale 10105

Even devoted early musicians may not be fully aware of the complicated heritage of our most familiar instruments, including the violin family, the gamba family, the guitar, and the lute, all of which ultimately can be traced back to the *convivencia* of three cultures, languages, and religions: Christian/Spanish/Portuguese, Jewish/Hebrew, and Islamic/Arabic in the medieval Iberian Peninsula. Likewise, many musical traditions today in Latin America and the Caribbean are still clearly drawing on those medieval Iberian roots, whether in Cuba—where the *laud* is played with a plectrum, as was the medieval and Renaissance lute—or Brazil, where the *rabeca* lives on in the folk music of the Northeast. Laury Gutiérrez is known to Bostonians and farther afield from her work with *La Donna Musicale*, focusing on music by women composers of the late baroque, including Antonia Bembo, Élisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre, and Anna Bon. She draws on her heritage from her native Venezuela in creating *RumBarroco*, a fusion ensemble that makes explicit the many connections in the Latin cultural mix. (The CD's booklet reproduces a wonderful 18th-century painting from Mexico that details the naming of sixteen different types of racial/cultural intermixing between Spanish, Jews, Moors, Blacks, and Indians.) *RumBarroco*'s program blends traditional and notated sources from Iberian music with the stylistic trademarks of modern popular styles, including rumba (Cuba), cumbia (Colombia), merengue (Dominican Republic), and joropo (Venezuela). The performing ensemble is too large and various to list, including a vocal quintet, flute, strings, harpsichord, plucked strings (in addition to being a fine gambist, Gutiérrez plays guitar, bandola, and cuatro), and, most importantly, percussion. You deserve to experience this ensemble in concert (the one I attended concluded with an electrifying percussion duel as an encore), but until you can, don't miss its debut CD.

—Tom Moore



**Sing Thee Nowell**

New York Polyphony  
(Geoffrey Williams, Steven  
Caldicott Wilson, Christopher  
Dylan Herbert, Craig Phillips),  
with Sarah Brailey & Elizabeth  
Baber Weaver, sopranos  
BIS-2099

Most serious singers can't avoid earning their bread with music for Advent and Christmas, and thus becoming jaded by the incessant repetition of the usual suspects for the season. (I confess!) Thus it takes exceptional discernment and good taste for a vocal ensemble to launch a seasonal program that does not disappoint. No such problem here. This is an outstanding disc combining beautiful performances with fresh and interesting compositions, both from the Renaissance and our own days. The collection begins chastely with the familiar tune of *Veni Emmanuel*, but the chords that set "Gau-de!" are dissonant, strong, beautiful, and modern. Congratulations, André Smith! I would love to hear more of your work. The other modern works on the program include compositions and arrangements by Geoffrey Williams, Alexander Craig, John Scott, Michael McGlynn, Peter Warlock, and the *Five Carols* by Richard Rodney Bennett. The early music includes motets by Philippe Verdelot (*Gabriel archangelus*), Thomas Byttering (*Nesciens mater*), Richard Pygott (*Quid petis*), Tomás Luis de Victoria (*O magnum mysterium*), and Jacob Clemens (*Magi veniunt*). It is difficult for me to generate high enough praise for the performances of the ensemble's four exceptional male singers. Each individual voice is beautifully produced, and the blend and tuning are exemplary. The tempos are well considered, and even when slow (especially when slow), the lines are shaped, sustained, and spun out in a manner that only those who also sing can know is as difficult as it is masterful. Every piece the group touches is golden. The Byttering makes me yearn for a whole disc of English 15th-century polyphony (Old Hall, please?). In a just world, this quartet would have a MacArthur "genius" grant and perform at the White House. Here's hoping.

—Tom Moore