
EXAUDI

Selected Reviews

Gesualdo: Madrigali [disc]

Winter & Winter No. 910 259-2

"They focus more on the melodic lines and the exquisitely agonising harmonies of his later, crazily intense madrigals - and yet they capture certain feelings which other groups miss, like the yearning for peace which seems to come over the music at times, as if all the passion is just too much...it's the emotional wisdom as well as the beauty of EXAUDI's disc which gives it the edge." - **Ivan Hewett, The Daily Telegraph**

"EXAUDI's one-to-a-part approach stands comparison with the finest continental specialists in this repertory...their Gesualdo is finely etched, monumental and closely considered...The unanimity of purpose and the sense of engagement with Gesualdo's rigorous caprice sustains and richly rewards repeated listening. These are deeply intelligent and attractive performances." - **Fabrice Fitch, Gramophone**

"The voices of EXAUDI are superbly attuned to each other, but are also characterful as individuals and highly responsive to the texts. Inner tensions are explored with selective use of vibrato to give ornamental and expressive weight, and there is a breathtakingly wide spectrum of colour and dynamic shading...What makes EXAUDI special to my ears is the red-blooded way in which they tackle this kind of text, line-editing their response and changing their expression within phrases to deliver maximum effect." - **Dominy Clements, MusicWeb International**

"The vocal ensemble EXAUDI, directed by James Weeks, has selected works from the Fifth and Sixth Books of Madrigali a superb new disc (Winter & Winter). They sing with impeccable definition and accuracy, letting each dissonance burn and scorch until the ear longs for release." - **Fiona Maddocks, The Observer**

Berio: Sinfonia, Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra and Susanna Mälkki (September 2019)

"EXAUDI's electronically amplified vocals, recitation of text snippets and fluttering of phonemes were assured and millimeter-accurate and did not overwhelm the orchestra" – **Jukka Isopuro, Helsingin Sanomat**

Michael Finnissy: vocal works 1974-2015 [disc]

Winter & Winter No. 910 246-2

"Their breathtaking stamina never dies, no matter what contemporary composers hurl their way. Such as Michael Finnissy, a master of jagged onslaughts and the dissonant labyrinth, but a master too of the ruggedly expressive, certainly in his madrigal cycle Gesualdo: Libro Sesto, the new album's highlight. Such is the power of these performances that after each work I felt I ought to plunge my head under a tap, then sit in silence for ten minutes." – **Geoff Brown, The Times**

"Exaudi prove once again what a skilled ensemble they are, bringing vividly to life contemporary music of complexity, enabling listeners to understand and appreciate the composer's vision" – **Martin Cullingford, Gramophone Editor's Choice**

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"This is one of those recordings where composer and performers seem uniquely matched. One senses a degree of commitment that is rare even from an ensemble that isn't known for pulling its punches...the interplay of these sonorities really is extraordinary. That the essential character of all seven pieces can be recalled after just one hearing testifies to their impact and cogency. The cycle also shows that Exaudi's virtuosity doesn't just hit you between the eyes; it runs deep" – **Fabrice Fitch, Gramophone**

BBC Proms: Open Ear, Tanks at Tate Modern (September 2017)

"Standing head-and-shoulders above everything was Cassandra Miller's Guide, which was inspired by a 1960 recording of a Southern Baptist hymn. The eight voices of the choir Exaudi recreated the hymn, each in their own way, creating a beautiful and moving sense of multitudes of voices raised in rapt, quiet praise." – **John Allison, The Telegraph**

James Weeks: Mala Punica, Walled Garden [disc]

Winter & Winter

"finespun music by James Weeks, performed by his peerless vocal ensemble Exaudi and the excellent instrumentalists of the Netherlands-based Hortus Ensemble...There's a refinement and definition to the writing that sounds just right in Exaudi's chiselled-but-definitely-not-chaste delivery" – **Kate Molleson, The Guardian**

Wigmore Hall (February 2015)

"a remarkable evening of vocal virtuosity in extreme music, very old and very new. No one does it better than the eight-voice ensemble EXAUDI" – **Hilary Finch, The Times**

BBC Proms, Birtwistle Prom with Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (September 2014)

"As Oliver Knussen observes in Fiona Maddocks's deftly illuminating new book Harrison Birtwistle, even a tiny piece like *Dinah and Nick's Love Song*, written on a single sheet of paper, 'casts a spell out of all proportion to its dimensions'. And so it did when he conducted it plus two other Birtwistle classics, with contralto Hilary Summers, EXAUDI, and the Birmingham Contemporary Music group. This made a fascinating hour." – **Michael Church, The Independent**

"This was furthered by the ethereal interjections of six sopranos from EXAUDI, whose onomatopoeic noises and siren-like swoops supplemented the magical mood" – **Katy Wright, Bachtrack**

Aldeburgh Festival, Earthquake Mass (June 2014)

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"this was a fascinating juxtaposition between early and contemporary music. Aldeburgh is still feeling the after shocks." – **Claire Jackson, Early Music Today**

Tectonics Festival Glasgow (May 2014)

"while Exaudi's astoundingly well-sung programme included Christopher Fox's heady tangle of voices in Preluding and the mesmeric keening of Cassandra Miller's Guide. [...]" – **Kate Molleson, The Guardian**

EXPOSURE [disc]

HCR 2013

"EXAUDI is one of the most interesting vocal groups working today. The range of the group's commissioning of both established and younger contemporary composers is extensive. Its skill in the execution of those commissioned compositions, which tend to the experimental and the complex, is invariably high, with its interpretative style being imaginative, musical and alive to conceptual exploration." – **Stephen Graham, Tempo**

Wigmore Hall, 'O Tenebroso Giorno: Gesualdo Then and Now' (November 2013)

"One emerges from an Exaudi concert as if from a Finnish sauna, rigorously scrubbed and massaged, all lingering harmonic sludge swept away. You feel healthy, pure and courageous — though not as courageous as James Weeks's vocal group in choosing their repertoire. Only the dangerously contemporary will do, or the prickliest old masters, sung unaccompanied with scorching force and no safety net." – **Geoff Brown, The Times**

'Exposure2013' at Only Connect Theatre (October 2013)

"For what must be a very difficult piece, EXAUDI made both the content and delivery seem effortless" – **Hilary Glover, Planet Hugill**

Wigmore Hall, Tenth Anniversary Concert (October 2012)

"the excitement lay in forthright voices scaling pitches where only supersonic jets should fly and treating all complexity as a stroll in the park." – **Geoff Brown, The Times**

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"the programme juxtaposed old and new, with madrigals taken from the third and fourth books by Monteverdi, and the fifth and sixth by Gesualdo, performed with the same fastidious attention to detail, one singer to a part, that the group brought to each contemporary work." – **Andrew Clements, The Guardian**

"EXAUDI, the vocal ensemble which this year celebrates a decade of marrying the richness of ancient musical styles to the complexities of contemporary music...Throughout, the singers, sometimes directed by Weeks, sometimes not, demonstrated that vocal purity needn't override expression, while precision doesn't preclude individuality: every voice made its presence felt within the group identity." – **The Evening Standard**

"EXAUDI means "Hear!" and it's a fine name for this eight-voice vocal group, which approaches its twin loves of new music and Renaissance music with the same missionary zeal. James Weeks, the group's director, wants to show both can seize our hearts and minds with the same immediacy...The most moving of the new works was Michael Finnissy's adaptation of a Gesualdo madrigal, his three added vocal parts adding a mournful commentary to Gesualdo's original. Here, as elsewhere, the performances were a marvel." – **Ivan Hewett, The Telegraph**

'Exposure 2011', Kings Place (October 2011)

"I have to say that it has been some of the best money I have spent on a concert all year. The group manage the wild frontiers of avant garde choral music with a mix of good singing, fearsome musicianship and (very English this one) wit" – **framescourer**

Quincena Musical, San Sebastian (August 2011)

"the choir EXAUDI had to work beautifully to get all of the expressive juice from the works they presented, mostly with religious themes. Certainly difficult scores that, even at the risk of generalising, shared complex polyphonic textures, variable and surprising nuances, demanding intervals, moments of sound impact, great vocal challenges, dynamics squeezed to the limit and long notes held impossibly." – **El Diario Vasco**

Arvo Pärt with Endymion, Wigmore Hall (July 2011)

"music of rapturous, daring simplicity, vigorously etched by a string quartet drawn from Endymion and three of Exaudi's fearless voices... The tenor Simon Wall stood his ground, mostly on one note, in the Wallfahrtslied (Pilgrim's Song) of 1984. Other Exaudi colleagues joined him in the moving Stabat Mater, a work where time seems to stand still. The spellbinding sound of Juliet Fraser's soprano beaming in, laser-like, from on high will remain for a long time." – **The Times**

'Everlasting Light', Aldeburgh Festival (June 2011)

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"the choir [sic] Exaudi appeared, looking just like characters out of Mad Men. They sang fascinating Renaissance madrigals about cosmography and the Sybilline prophecies, and eerily apt modern music by Ligeti. Finally we and the choir pitched up in front of Sizewell, sinister in the violet evening gloom. Suddenly Jones's film projections of scientific imagery magically appeared on its blank wall, and what was all-too-solid and grim seemed to melt into air. The strange haunted atmosphere and the romance of that far-off age came together in the most magical way." – **The Telegraph**

Howard Skempton Portrait, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (February 2010)

"EXAUDI performed four choral pieces with stunning purity of sound, which allowed the music's radiance to shine out with full force. Skempton sometimes disarms by being deceptive and surprising. But there's nothing so disarming as being straightforwardly ecstatic, as his lovely setting of Shelley's 'Voice of the Spirits' proved." – **The Telegraph**

Poppe Interzone, Ensemble Intercontemporain (December 2009)

Festival d'Automne

"the micro-intervalllic universe – from quarter to sixth, even eighth of a tone! – served tonight with rare precision by the Ensemble Intercontemporain joined by the excellent EXAUDI vocal ensemble" – **resmusica**

"The vocal precision and the sonic beauty of the five soloists of the EXAUDI Ensemble are a pleasure in themselves beyond the poetic meanders of a text in English difficult to assimilate at first sight. The voices are fully in accord with the subtlety of a music with tilted attacks, at intervals up to the eighth of a tone, and with sonic refinements hitherto untouched. Their musicality is a delight." – **concertonet**

'Exposure', The Cutting Edge Series (October 2009)

"This year the series was expertly launched by the vocal ensemble Exaudi, one of the most sensationally gifted vocal groups performing in the UK at the moment. Exaudi have swiftly gathered a dedicated following, and the concert started 20 minutes late as the organisers hurriedly arranged some extra seating to accommodate the unanticipated numbers of people turning up on the night." – **Gramophone Magazine**

"The vocal ensemble EXAUDI opened Sound and Music's The Cutting Edge series of concerts at The Warehouse last week with a typically enterprising programme of new and newish works by young (and youngish!) composers. Led by their director James Weeks, EXAUDI's performance exhibited technical poise alongside real elegance in interpretation that befitted their obvious passion for the music" – **musicalcriticism.com**

Cage and Machaut, fuseleeds Festival (April 2009)

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"nothing could match the intimate surprises of this early evening gig by Exaudi, the British vocal ensemble that delights in programming the unthinkable — such as John Cage and Guillaume de Machaut. On the surface, 20th-century music's biggest smasher of traditions and the 14th century's deftest polyphonic weaver of hymns to courtly love were never meant to co-habit. Yet by picking from Cage's rambunctious catalogue only the simplest, sparest and in most cases shortest pieces, Exaudi's director James Weeks made a triumphant case for letting the two lie side by side." – **The Times**

"The vocal ensemble Exaudi expand the definition to over six centuries, in a programme that interleaves work by the medieval master Guillaume de Machaut and the modernist icon John Cage. The pairing isn't quite as bizarre as it sounds. As the guiding spirit of ars nova, the 14th-century avant garde, Machaut's radical new harmonies must have seemed every bit as arresting as Cage's use of prepared instruments and the music of chance was in the 20th century..." – **The Guardian**

Rihm and Lassus, Aldeburgh Easter Festival (March 2008)

"an expressive control of dissonance and an emotional directness that are very much Rihm's own. EXAUDI conveyed all that with a confidence that belied the technical challenges the singers were meeting so effortlessly. It was hard to imagine this music better performed, and there could be no better context in which to hear it." – **The Guardian**

"The singers of the justly celebrated EXAUDI compelled instant attention with their secure treading of the sometimes rocky harmonic paths of Orlande de Lassus...if Lassus is occasionally rocky then Rihm is often – vertiginous? To begin a devotional piece quietly with such grating dissonances requires musicianship of the highest order and nerves of the toughest steel...James Weeks and the members of EXAUDI will know from the atmosphere and the response that they delivered something special and this review can only hint at what those lucky enough to be present experienced. At the risk of repetition, perfection." – **East Anglian Daily Times**

'NOW' at Edinburgh Contemporary Arts Trust (November 2007)

"On Tuesday, contemporary vocal ensemble Exaudi gave a startling object lesson in just how flexible the human voice is. They huffed, puffed, popped and even sang a programme that encompassed the extreme demands of such radicals as Luigi Nono, Wolfgang Rihm and Michael Finnissy... The microtonal eccentricities of reclusive Italian aristocrat Giacinto Scelsi's Tre Canti Sacri sent a chilling ring round the voluble Greyfriars acoustics, amplified by the mind-blowing dynamic range of this eight-piece ensemble... From the barely audible esotericism of James Saunders's #281107 to Finnissy and Nono, Rihm's Quo Me Rapis and onwards through the new works, EXAUDI made this challenging repertoire seem easy and, more importantly, a thoroughly enjoyable experience." – **The Scotsman**

Italian programme, Aldeburgh Festival (June 2007)

"EXAUDI – 12 musically superb and technically accomplished singers, 4 women and 8 men, directed by James Weeks – first set a contemplative mood by singing plainchant. This was followed by Three Tenebrae Responsories by Gesualdo, the aristocratic composer of intensely chromatic vocal works...EXAUDI's performances here were luminous and haunting. They captured the

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murky mood of the music, which, in the reverberant acoustics of the beautiful church, dating partly from Norman times, had a hallucinatory effect. Luigi Nono's astringently beautiful *Sarà Dolce Tacere* (1960) concluded the program. Do all the singers in EXAUDI have perfect pitch? I doubt it. Yet how else to explain that they were able to find and hold the pitches during the skittish, leaping passages of this complex 12-tone score?" – **The New York Times**

"Following the Italian theme, they sang Gesualdo and Monteverdi, and then jumped feet first into the 20th century with pieces of mind-bending complexity by Sciarrino, Castiglioni, Scelsi and Nono. This is music that few people are likely to hear more than once, but if that one time is a performance by EXAUDI they are not likely to forget it. Where else are there sopranos like these, guaranteed to hit the notes other choral singers cannot reach?" – **The Financial Times**

Spitalfields Winter Festival (December 2006)

"This Spitalfields Winter Festival concert kicked off with Tallis polyphony at its most exultant in the 20-minute *Gaude gloriosa Dei mater*. Four hundred years and one hour later, we ended with a cough — the final notated sound in the panoply of siren cries, shouting, whistling, and glissandi that make up the angry, fearsome Xenakis score *Nuits*, dedicated to political prisoners. To successfully combine both stylistic extremes in the same concert takes stamina, skill, bravery and cheek. No problem for EXAUDI: James Weeks's young vocal ensemble, 12-strong in this manifestation, has never sought the easy life. A different aural jolt arrived with the selection from Michael Finnissy's *Seven Sacred Motets* of 1991. We usually think of Finnissy as a fiendish creator of barbed-wire jungles; yet, driven by his faith, he stripped himself down in these marvellous pieces to several florid vocal lines arching over insistent drones. Music of contemplation, this; but music with teeth and sinews. EXAUDI easily found the eloquence and beauty in what on the page might seem spare, even arid. It was all over, without an interval, inside of 70 minutes. If only more concerts were like this: focused, no fat, risky and brilliant." – **The Times**

Michael Finnissy at 60 (August 2006)

"EXAUDI's concert was a real highlight in a weekend of extraordinary performances. Rather than simply being a pastiche of sacred modal music Finnissy completely inhabits this sound world, and you do not have to share the composer's faith to recognise the conviction in the music. On the evidence of this concert there cannot be many vocal ensembles around who can touch EXAUDI!" – **New Notes**

Ferneyhough Portrait, Aldeburgh Festival (June 2006)

"There are some performances that you know will be etched on your memory forever, such is their intensity and power. The EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble, a group of young singers conducted by their founder James Weeks, sang Brian Ferneyhough's 1969 *Missa Brevis* with thrilling commitment and immediacy, revealing this masterpiece of modernism to be among the great settings of these archetypal texts. As with all of Ferneyhough's music, the *Missa Brevis* teems with complexity and extremity: words were pulverised into syllables or atomised into screams and whispers. The *Gloria* ended with an existential shout and the *Kyrie* began with a vision of a musical abyss, the basses at the bottom of their register and the sopranos attempting to scale stratospheric heights. But Weeks and the EXAUDI singers somehow alchemised all this ferocious technical difficulty into music of shattering directness. The terrifying textures of the music created a sense of awe and wonder: by throwing out traditional ideas about how these texts should be put to music, Ferneyhough's piece created its own kind of transcendence. The final seconds of the work were astonishing, as one

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of the sopranos held an impossibly high note for an unfeasibly long time. It was a moment that symbolised the transfiguring power of this "short mass"." – **The Guardian**

"As for [Ferneyhough's] Missa Brevis (1969), the chamber choir EXAUDI's superconfident rendering under James Weeks at Orford Church was a bang-smash hit and left me feeling that this wildly uninhibited but cannily calculated work is as much a 1960s icon as Stockhausen's vocal Stimmung from the previous year." – **The Sunday Times**

"What looked in advance a heavy-duty programme of music ancient and modern – rapt unaccompanied choral works by Obrecht and Ockeghem alongside ferociously aggressive new pieces by Brian Ferneyhough – went exactly as one might have expected until the last 20 minutes. That was when the EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble launched themselves into Ferneyhough's jaw-droppingly difficult Missa Brevis. As individual voices sparred with each other in complex combative groups and sopranos soared to stratospheric heights that one would have thought out of human reach, the adrenalin level reached fever pitch – and not just for the audience." – **The Financial Times**

"If Irvine Arditti's feverish playing of [Ferneyhough's] Unsichtbare Farben was gobsmacking, EXAUDI's performance of the impossibly difficult and wonderfully effective Missa Brevis took the breath away." – **Classical Music Magazine**