



**PAUS *The Beauty That Still Remains*<sup>1</sup>. RATKJE *Asylos*<sup>2</sup>**

• Anne Karin Sundal-Ask, cond; <sup>1</sup>Frode Haltli (acc); <sup>1,2</sup>Nora Aleksandra Lindeman Katla, <sup>2</sup>Amalie Eikenes Randen, <sup>2</sup>Selma Aurelia Holth (sop); <sup>2</sup>Marianne Beate Kielland (ms); Norwegian Girls' Ch • 2L 157 (SACD + Audio Blu-ray 72:26)

This release of choral works by Norwegian composers Marcus Paus (b. 1979) and Maja S. K. Ratkje (b. 1973) begins with *The Beauty That Still Remains* by Paus, a 40-minute setting of quotes from Anne Frank's diary. It was commissioned for the Norwegian Girls' Choir and accordionist Frode Haltli as a commemoration, in 2015, of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of occupied Europe after World War II. Paus has stated that he was trying to musically depict the young Dutch girl's courage and sense of hope rather than being absorbed by the horror of her tragedy. He took his title from Frank's words, "In spite of everything... I still believe that people are truly good at heart. There is always some beauty left: in... the clouds, the moon and the stars... In sunshine, freedom, in yourself... The beauty that still remains." But the music does also capture the sense of desolation that she felt, and the piece closes with a haunting entry, "Dear Kitty... Dearest Kitty... if only there were no other people in the world."

A composer takes on a major challenge when choosing a subject like this. Anne Frank has become almost a commercial property because of the universality of her story and her writings. The spare scoring for girls' choir and accordion is perfect for the text Paus sets. The text is not included with the disc but is available at 2L's website [http://www.2l.no/media/2L-157\\_lyrics\\_Beauty-Remains\\_Anne-Frank.pdf](http://www.2l.no/media/2L-157_lyrics_Beauty-Remains_Anne-Frank.pdf). It helps to have the text at hand when listening, because the roomy ambience of the recording makes many of the words unintelligible, even though they are in English.

The music itself is largely tonal, even melodic at its core, and remarkably effective in portraying the contrasts in a teenage girl's makeup, as Frank's diary shows. Paus manages to convey her mood swings and the sense of contemplation that marks her writing. The Norwegian Girls' Choir is made up of young singers who are close to the same age as Frank when she was hiding from the Nazis. This adds poignancy to the performance. I found the score riveting—it commanded my full attention and emotional involvement throughout its 40-minute length. The

unusual colors of the accordion, played with great sensitivity by Haltli, added much to the impact of the score.

From a musical as well as sonic viewpoint, this is not a recording for casual listening. 2L is a boutique Norwegian record company that demonstrates an adventurous approach to programming along with high-end recorded sound. This release comes with two discs, a superb SACD and a Blu-ray Audio disc. I listened to the SACD in regular stereo using the SACD layer.

Ratkje's *Asylos* is a work for chorus and female solo singers that was also commissioned for the Norwegian Girls' Choir. The text was created by poet Aasne Linnestå by drawing from, and adapting, words by the idealistic French philosopher Simone Weil, who died at the age of 34 in 1943; the cause was self-starvation, thought to be an act of solidarity with the victims of Nazism. The word "asylos" is a Greek word meaning "inviolable," and it is the root of the English "asylum." According to the notes (which are excellent, and necessary reading in order to understand the work) Weil was deeply interested in music, particularly Gregorian chants. Much of the piece is built on those chants. The text of the piece sets Weil's words alongside some children's songs, but they are used in fragment form. The sound of the words is what matters, not their meaning, but 2L does provide them at its website ([www.2l.no/media/2L-157\\_lyrics\\_Asylos.pdf](http://www.2l.no/media/2L-157_lyrics_Asylos.pdf)). The point is made that the lyrics are not translated, but are "mainly fragments and disrupted passages that only make sense when in a sonic and musical context."

I found *Asylos* strangely moving, incorporating beauty, humor, and an alternating sense of isolation and community. Mezzo-soprano Marianne Beate Kielland sings Weil's words in a recitative form, and she also takes on the role of messenger. In her personal philosophy Weil turned more and more toward mysticism and, despite being born Jewish, toward Catholicism. She was deeply concerned with issues of social justice throughout her brief life, and this 31-minute work successfully brings together her humanity and concern over human suffering with the sense of comfort that she experienced through her spiritual beliefs. It is a difficult work to describe, but in this performance it is in the end a consoling experience.

This is a uniquely beautiful and moving disc, offering exquisite performances of two highly original and compelling pieces of music, beautifully conducted by Anne Karin Sundal-Ask. The singing of the Norwegian Girls' Choir is extraordinary in its sensitivity to dynamic shadings and varieties of color and mood, and the recorded sound could not be bettered.

**Henry Fogel, *Fanfare Magazine*, May-June 2020**

5 stars: Deeply moving and beautiful contemporary Norwegian choral works