

Mark Hewitt

CD REVIEW: 'O MAGNUM MYSTERIUM' – STAIRWELL CAROLLERS, PIERRE MASSIE

'O Magnum Mysterium' – Stairwell Carollers, directed by Pierre Massie.

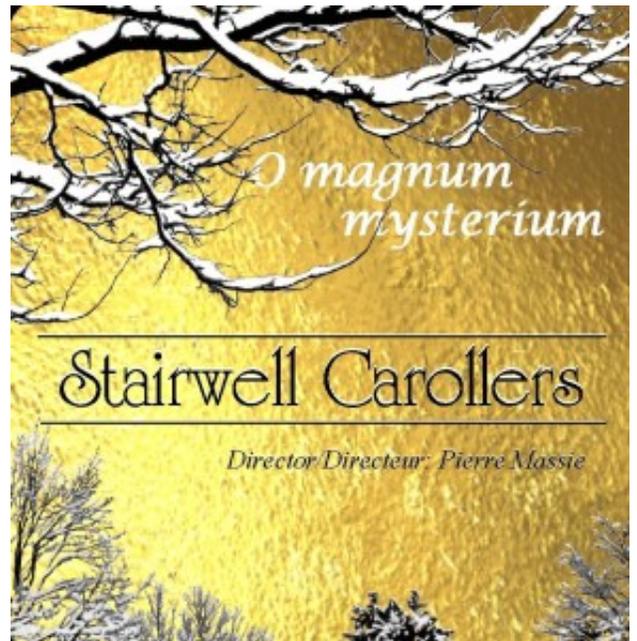
Available from www.stairwellcarollers.com

Review by Mark Hewitt

The Stairwell Carollers' new disc 'O Magnum Mysterium' is the choir's eighth album and is a very generously filled disc, nearly running to 80 minutes of unaccompanied choral Christmas music. This Canadian choir, based in Ottawa, was founded in 1977 by their musical director, Pierre Massie. The choir has significant philanthropic credentials, having raised substantial funds for local scholarships and charities.

The choir's musical credentials are no less impressive: they demonstrate secure intonation, clarity of diction, a warm tone and a rhythmic incisiveness. Pierre Massie draws some fine singing and a secure sense of ensemble from his choir. Even the most familiar carols are performed as if newly-minted.

As well as founding and directing the Stairwell Carollers, Pierre Massie is also a composer and arranger. His compositions and arrangements are tailor-made for the choir and demonstrate a keen ear for choral texture, sample, for example, the playful scat-style singing in 'Nouvelle Agreeable', the delightful bell chimes in 'Venez divin Messie' or 'What Child Is This?' with its ear-catching combination of drones and 'Greensleeves'-like melody. The disc's title 'O Magnum Mysterium' refers to Massie's composition of the same name and is an impassioned



contemplation on the mystery of Christ's birth and rings out with joyful 'Alleluias' at the work's climax.

Amongst the British works on the disc, Herbert Howell's 'Here is the little door' is given here a radiant and deeply expressive performance. The expansive tempo is highly successful in elevating this modest piece into something rich and resplendent. John Rutter's 'Dormi Jesu' is sung with great sensitivity and tenderness.

Amongst the more familiar pieces is some less familiar fare, such as Peter Wishart's 'Alleluja, a new work is come on hand'. It is a measure of the choir's technical prowess that they can successfully navigate the difficulties of this piece with great precision, clarity and flair. Another less-familiar work is John Tavener's 'Village Wedding'. Tavener sets fragments of a poem by Sikelianos and Isaiah's dance from the orthodox wedding service, making a feature of contrasting passages of homophony with folk-like heterophony and is touchingly performed by the choir.

The whole disc is a cornucopia of musical delights, both familiar and unfamiliar and such is the variety of the programming and the creativity of interpretation and execution that the disc is a real listening pleasure from beginning to end. A resounding success!