

FROM MusicWeb International

Gustav MAHLER(1860-1911)

Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen(for chamber orchestra, arr. Schoenberg) (Mahler's original version, for voice and piano, 1885) [17:01]

Das Lied von der Erde(for chamber orchestra, arr. Schoenberg-Riehn) (1908-1909) [62:00]

•Brennen Guillory (tenor); Emma Curtis (contralto); David Stout (baritone)

Orchestra of the Swan/Kenneth Woods

rec. live, 19 November 2010, Townsend Hall, Shipston-on-Stour, UK.

Song texts and English translations provided

•SOMM CÉLESTE SOMMCD 0109[79:27] 



Having just reviewed a fine performance of the original *Das Lied von der Erde* from Houston (Naxos [8.572498](#)) it seemed a good idea to tackle the two Schoenberg arrangements as played by this curiously-titled orchestra and their principal guest conductor, Kenneth Woods. These works are the product of Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical Performances (Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen) set up in Vienna in 1918 to promote and present the work of modern composers to sympathetic audiences.

One only has to read contemporary accounts of the premiere of Schoenberg's Second String Quartet in 1908 and see the caricatures published in *Die Zeitto* be

reminded of just how toxic the Austrian capital was for Mahler, Schoenberg and their forward-thinking allies. Little wonder that Schoenberg felt the need for such a group which, although it folded in 1921, had a substantial worklist and held regular concerts. Among his Mahler arrangements are the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*– written for a concert in 1920 – and *Das Lied von der Erde* which, apart from the first song, had to be fleshed out by the conductor Rainer Riehn in 1983.

There are several recordings of the Schoenberg-Riehn score, Osmo Vänskä (BIS), Kent Nagano (Sony) and Philippe Herreweghe (Harmonia Mundi) among them. The latter performance, from a conductor I don't usually warm to, is rather splendid, helped in no small measure by a reach-out-and-touch recording and the presence of a near-ideal tenor, Hans Peter Blochwitz. The soloists on the SOMM recording are all unfamiliar, but seconds into the first of the Wayfarer songs – *Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht*– I was more than contented with David Stout's steady, characterful baritone. Diction is good, and the balance between orchestra and soloist seems just right.

The overall sound is wonderfully aerated, perfect for music that's so artfully distilled, the lower strings especially rich and vibrant. The *pizzicati* in that Mahlerian *ur-tune* *Ging heut' morgen übers Feld* are a joy to hear, although it's Stout's subtle, feeling response to this song that really catches the ear and gladdens the heart. The real pleasure resides in Schoenberg's masterly arrangement, which preserves the mood and manner of Mahler's originals while condensing his sound-world to its bare, ear-pricking essentials. Newcomers to this arrangement will be pleased to hear that it's anything but desiccated, *Ich hab' ein glühend Messer*, a fine example of late-Romantic blush contained in a score of remarkable economy and elegance.

Indeed, elegance is a good description of Woods' approach to these songs; he coaxes glorious sounds from his players and, thanks to a good recording and quiet audience, every nudge and nuance is easily heard. The aching loveliness of *Die zwei blauen Augen* has seldom been so feelingly caught, those dragging rhythms so well judged. Crowning it all is Stout's fine-spun singing; really, this is a voice I would travel many miles to hear. I've added him to my list of singers to watch. And if that's not enough, the beautifully-turned orchestral

coda has a sustained, heart-stopping delicacy I've rarely encountered in this oft-played song.

Goodness, what an arresting start to this disc and proof, as I pointed out in my Houston review, that the best Mahler doesn't only emanate from Vienna, Berlin or Lucerne. What of *Das Lied von der Erde*? It's a tougher piece to bring off, but *Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde* certainly makes a good first impression, tenor Brennen Guillory, suitably ardent, coping well with Mahler's taxing tessitura. The orchestral playing is as pointful as before, textures clean without being squeakily so; indeed, despite the general lightness of tread and the rarefied scoring there's no doubting the music's provenance.

Woods adopts sensible speeds throughout, and there's a pleasing scale and shape to this reading that, although it's less forthright than Herreweghe's, is no worse for that. Contralto Emma Curtis makes a fine entrance in *Der Einsame im Herbst*, but only after a delectable orchestral prelude that simply glows with the colours of autumn. She doesn't efface memories of Jane Henschel in that Houston recording, but there's a vulnerability to her delivery that's entirely apt. Evanescence is always a word that springs to mind here, and that's evident at every turn, from Curtis's girlish singing to the orchestra's dark, woody tones.

Von der Jugend is wonderfully mobile, Guillory as deft as one could hope for. There are moments, though, when Schoenbergian clarity is replaced by a degree of opacity, but on the whole this Riehn completion is fairly satisfying, and it's well played and sung. Ditto *Von der Schönheit*, with its *secht*-Mahlerian calls and counter-calls, Curtis clear and characterful as ever, if a little rushed at times. Bass is sparingly used in these arrangements, but when it appears – as here – it's reasonably well defined. Unusually for a live recording the nicely etched sound has a compensating halo of warmth that's easy on the ear.

In *Der Trunkene im Frühling* Guillory is perhaps a little overstretched compared with Blochwitz, but otherwise there's very little to criticise here. As for *Der Abschied*, I described it in my Houston review as an *abendrot* like no other; and so it proves here, from the opening tam-tam stroke to the falling figures that follow. Curtis may not have the tonal richness of Herreweghe's Birgit Remmert, but still she sings with quiet authority, shadowed by orchestral playing of equal poise. Even in this trembling air of dissolution and decay, pulse is all important, and Woods doesn't let it falter. But for all the score's felicities, the occasional monochrome moment makes one regret all the more that Schoenberg never completed the arrangement himself.

I wouldn't want to be without Herreweghe and his team in *Das Lied von der Erde*, even though he offers no filler. As it happens, it's the shorter piece on the SOMM disc that's the real treasure. Make no mistake, the main work is supremely well played and sung, but it does face stiff competition from elsewhere.

A fine Mahler disc, much prized for a radiant account of the Wayfarer songs.

Dan Morgan

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