

IRR OUTSTANDING




Mahler

New

Das Lied von der Erde (arr. Arnold Schoenberg/Rainer Riehn)^a. Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen (arr. Schoenberg)^b.

^aEmma Curtis (contralto); ^aBrennen Guillory (tenor); ^bDavid Stout (baritone); Orchestra of the Swan/Kenneth Woods.

Somm Céleste SOMMCD0109 (medium price, 1 hour 19 minutes). German texts and English translations included. Website www.somm-recordings.com  Producer Siva Oke. Engineer Gary Cole. Date Live performances at Townsend Hall, Shipston-on-Stour, Warwickshire on November 19th, 2010.

This is an absolutely astonishing recording in many respects: owing to the massive concentration on Mahler's music in 2010-11, many details of his life and of his relationships with fellow-musicians are now better known. His relationship with Arnold Schoenberg and with Schoenberg's colleagues is today relatively common knowledge; those younger musicians, after Mahler's death at the age of 50, did much to promote his work whenever they could. By 1920 Mahler's reputation, despite increasing rapidly after his death, was, especially in the wake of the First World War and the collapse of the German/Austro-Hungarian Empires, with very few exceptions, on the point of serious decline. This was partly as a result of the post-war economic situation across defeated Europe, which meant



that vast orchestral forces (which were generally available before 1914, and for

which Mahler and many other composers wrote as a matter of course) were simply unaffordable. In those circumstances, Schoenberg was a prime mover in founding a society for the semi-private performance of music (from which concerts critics were banned – or, at least, forbidden to write about them).

Those concerts often featured what we would call chamber orchestras and for one of those events Schoenberg prepared a chamber ensemble/orchestral version of Mahler's song-cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. He began a similar edition of *Das Lied von der Erde* (for slightly larger forces, as one may imagine), but his edition of the latter work did not proceed beyond the first song, which was the only one he completed. Schoenberg left his 'reorchestrations' of the remaining five songs of *Das Lied* in sketch form; in the event, it was not until as recently as 1983 (32 years after his death) that the musicologist Rainer Riehn took them up and completed them. Although this version of *Das Lied* is not entirely by Schoenberg, it seems that much of it is, an edition which deserves publication and performance on those grounds alone, alongside the wholly Schoenbergian *Fahrenden Gesellen* edition.

So we have the fascinating example of one great composer's music as arranged by another (we had a similar situation a year or so ago, when Guild issued Shostakovich's version for two pianos of Honegger's Third 'Liturgique' Symphony – GMCD7331). This new CD from Somm couples live performances of those two masterpieces by Mahler, in Schoenberg's arrangements, and the resultant very well-filled disc is a complete success.

In the first place, the performances are of a very high standard indeed from all three soloists. Emma Curtis's tone is remarkably pure throughout her very wide range (for a contralto – which of course includes the high Gs towards the end of 'Der Abschied', which she sings magnificently, so musically and profoundly intelligently, and her first entry in 'Der Einsame im Herbst', descending from a cruelly high F, is superbly phrased), with no hint of strain. Her singing is most beautiful and often very moving, and she has an equal partner in Brennen Guillory, whose account of his more dramatic songs is infused with great discipline and dignity. The instrumental playing is equally excellent throughout and the American conductor Kenneth Woods is consistently impressive.

It is difficult to believe that these performances are live, given on the same day, so silent and absorbed is the audience, but there are immediate and admirable musical benefits to be gained thereby in terms of concentration and re-creative oneness of conception. It may be claimed that elements of Mahler's original full orchestration (especially for the tenor in 'Das Trinklied', the opening song of *Das Lied*) make it difficult for the soloist to 'come through', as it were – the reduced instrumentation makes the vocal writing so much easier with which to cope, enabling us to appreciate Mahler's invention more clearly and Guillory's artistry the more. David Stout is an admirable interpreter of the youthful songs, beautifully sung and well characterized, and the coupling itself has much interest in a purely musicological sense: for here are Mahler's first and last 'song-cycles' on the one disc. In addition, the recording quality throughout is very fine, the instrumental timbres and internal balances being wonderfully caught in a perfect acoustic, the voices set so well against the chamber orchestra.

There is a slight drawback in the presentation of this otherwise perfect disc: the *raison d'être* for this issue is Schoenberg (plus Riehn), yet nowhere are we told in Peter Davison's booklet notes what the reduced instrumentation is. This not unimportant aspect of the production is as follows: in *Das Lied* a solo string quintet, plus wind quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn), percussion, harmonium and piano (maximum 15 players); in *Fahrenden Gesellen* it is ten players – flute, clarinet, harmonium, piano, glockenspiel, triangle, string quintet.

This is a most important issue and all Mahlerians should make its acquisition an urgent necessity.

Robert Matthew-Walker

Ponchielli Chamber Songs.

New

L'abbandono^a. Cantata a Gaetano Donizetti. Dio Amore!^a. Elegia. I Mori di Valenza – No! Pregar non poss'io^a. Una notte al camposanto (Elegia)^a. Pace e oblio^a. La povera^a. Povero fiorellino^a. I promessi sposi – Deh per pietà ... O santa Vergine^a. Un sogno^a. La staffetta di Gambalò. Il trovatore^a. Voga sull'onda placida (Piccola barcarola)^a.

^aFederica Zanello (soprano); Alberto Bruni (piano).

Dynamic S-2043 (full price, 55 minutes). Italian texts included. Website www.dynamic.it  Producers/Engineers Maurizio Maggi, Gianluca Bertoldi. Date August 2010.

Federica Zanello remarkably combines a career as an operatic soprano – her roles include Gilda, Violetta, Giulietta in Bellini's *Capuleti e i Montecchi* – with the posts of music critic for the Cremona-based newspaper *La Vita Cattolica* and artistic consultant to the city's Teatro Filodrammatici. Ponchielli

