

From Classical Source

Mahler, arr. Schoenberg
Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen
Mahler, arr. Schoenberg / Rainer Riehn
Das Lied von der Erde

David Stout (baritone) [Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen]



Emma Curtis (contralto) & Brennen Guillory (tenor)

Orchestra of the Swan
Kenneth Woods

Recorded 19 November 2010 in Townsend Hall,
Shipston-on-Stour, Warwickshire, England

Orchestra of the Swan, based in Stratford-upon-Avon, has already recorded Erwin Stein's chamber arrangement of Mahler's Fourth Symphony for Somm, with Principal Conductor David Curtis, and now adds *Das Lied von der Erde* with its principal guest, Kenneth Woods, and maintains that same high standard of playing.

Schoenberg's arrangements of the four Wayfarer songs and *Das Lied* (Schoenberg completing only the first song, his sketches for the other five being realised by Rainer Riehn in 1983) hold their own against Mahler's originals. The three singers are superb. In the Wayfarer songs, the baritone (with a strong bass element) David Stout is right inside their emotional range – their sense of loss, resignation and lost innocence – and while you're aware of his voice's potential in terms of size, he keeps it to the scale of the ensemble. He also produces a very seductive sound – warm, velvety, full of nuance and colour – and the descents into impenetrable blackness capture the poor traveller's experience of romantic despair with extraordinary conviction. Woods's tempos are spot on, with Stout deftly controlling the changes of mood and handling Mahler's irregular phrasing with great subtlety. In the third song, 'Ich hab' ein glühend Messer', his high-voice singing is magical, and the close of the last setting is wonderfully distracted. I was hugely impressed by him, by his restraint and musicality as much by the quality, or rather qualities, and total security of his voice. Woods's conducting is full of absorbing detail and gives Schoenberg's reduction a gripping intensity and immediacy. Schoenberg's scoring for the harmonium is particularly telling – its sound so atmospheric and so contemporary – a long way from the out-of-tune wheezing of those Victorian instruments you squeeze with your feet that are still in use today in some churches.

Aspects of the orchestration for *Das Lied* are so chamber-like anyway that the scaled-down version sounds perfectly natural, except, I found, for the way the piano is used, which has the effect of romanticising the score, but in a very non-Mahlerian, and rather anonymous, way. That aside, the instrumental playing, in both works, is very fine, and it's a shame that the names of the players aren't listed in the booklet (the texts are included though) – there are some heart-breaking violin solos and some stylish, expressive playing from oboist and clarinettist. The chamber version also exposes Mahler's use of oriental modes to expressionist effect.

Emotionally, this performance of *Das Lied* also presses the right buttons in terms of wisdom, wonder, resignation and regret – it never ceases to amaze how Mahler's response to the Chinese poems folds in such a complex range of feeling. Brennen Guillory barges his way deliriously through the two drinking songs and is heart-stopping in the visionary 'Von der Jugend', a really telling reminder from the old of the wonder of youth and how it's wasted on the young. Guillory's vocal range, control and power are quite something. Emma Curtis's full, voluptuous contralto suits the instrumental timbre brilliantly. Occasionally her vibrato is a bit too close, but in her higher register there's a Straussian strength and radiance to her singing, beautifully regulated and desolate in 'Der Einsame im

Herbst' and piercingly ecstatic in 'Der Abschied'. Obviously in this last movement you don't get Mahler's huge orchestral perspectives – although the long instrumental-only passage works extremely well – but the way in which singers, players and conductor connect with the music is remarkable and very moving. Highly recommended.

- SOMM
- Orchestra of the Swan
- Kenneth Woods