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Athené

divine art

the spirit of music

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HISTORIC SOUND

diversions

étmet

chanticleare

Clare Lesser (soprano)  David Lesser (piano)

01 Song 15 (1976)  Michael Finnissy (b.1946)  6.35
02 Hô – cinq vocalizes pour voix de femme (1960)  Giacinto Scelsi (1905-88)
03 1  2.27
04 2  3.32
05 3  3.08
06 Being Beauteous (1963)  (with David Lesser, piano)  Hans Werner Henze (b. 1926)  16.17
07 Die Sieben Plagen (1974)  Milko Kelemen (b. 1924)  9.29
08 Virgil Settings (1995)  David Lesser (b. 1966)  7.34
09 1  0.59
10 2  0.36
11 3  0.46
12 4  0.41
13 5  0.46
14 6  0.30
15 7  0.28
16 8  1.02
17 Stripsody (1966)  Cathy Berberian (1928-83)  4.31
Total CD duration:  53.37

Song 15 for solo soprano is a relatively early work showing Finnissy’s style at its most typically highly ornamented and lyrical. The piece can best be viewed as an extension of the tradition of wordless vocalise. As with much of his work for solo voice it makes great demands on the performer both in the rhythmic problems posed and in its extended range.


The reclusive Italian composer, Giancinto Scelsi wrote Ḥô in 1960. As in many of his vocal works, a conventional text is replaced by an abstract pattern of phonemes, which are used to return the music to the magical world of pre-linguistic invocation, and ritual, which Scelsi so often explored. The unusual linguistic approach is reflected in the music’s free use of microtones, which distances it from the conventional sound world of Western music, and which evokes instead the timeless mystery of much of the sacred music of the orient.


Henze’s cantata Being Beautesous originally sets one of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud’s finest works for the very unusual ensemble of coloratura soprano, four ‘cellos and harp; this recording makes use of the composer’s own piano reduction. It was written as the result of a commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation. Rimbaud’s text reflects a mystical spirituality together with a sensuous awareness of flesh in a heady mixture of extraordinarily vivid imagery. This is echoed in Henze’s setting with its rich harmonies, highly decorated lines and musical shadows of earlier composers, especially Alban Berg, which lend the music their own particular decadence.

Recorded on August 11th, 1997 in the Recital Hall of the Birmingham Conservatoire. Originally released on Dunelm DRD0106
Digitally remastered on January 8th, 2009.
Owing to the city centre location of the Birmingham Conservatoire, the listener may become aware of ambient traffic noise, particularly in the very quiet passages in some of the works, though digital filtering has been used to reduce this as far as possible.
Recording, Editing and Production: Jim Pattison
Recording Assistant: Joyce Pattison
Design: Stephen Sutton
Remastering: Stephen Sutton
Original sound recording made by Dunelm Records © 1997 © 2009 Divine Art Ltd

Publishers: Michael Peter Finnissy/GEMA (tr.1); SIAE/Ricordi & Co (tr. 2-4); GEMA/Schott Music Ltd (tr.5); GEMA/SGAE (tr.6); David Thomas Lesser (tr.7-16); Peters Edition Ltd (tr.17)

Other contemporary vocal recordings by Clare and David Lesser:

Dunelm DRD0161 (live recital)
Music by Strauss, Rihm, Copland, Berberian, Lesser, Britten, Poulenc, Honegger
Available by special order from divine art

Metier MSVCD 92068
Lieder by Wolfgang Rihm
Cathy Berberian is probably best remembered as one of the outstanding interpreters of contemporary vocal repertoire, having had pieces written for her by many of the leading composers of the post-war avant-garde. However, she also produced a small body of excellent compositions of which Stripsody is the best-known example. It was commissioned by the Bremen Radio Contemporary Music Festival and is basically a collage of vignettes from comic strips and assorted onomatopoeia with accompanying actions in some places. Stripsody could even be seen as a microcosmic evaluation of modern life with its absurdities and problems.

Clare Lesser studied performance and musical history at the University of Birmingham and Birmingham Conservatoire before undertaking research at the University of Sussex into the music of B. A. Zimmermann. She studied with Linda Hirst, Annette Merriweather and Françoise Kubler. She has sung throughout Europe and the Middle East, including at the Gaudeamus and Avignon International Festivals. In 2003 she was nominated for the Royal Philharmonic Society’s singing prize.

David Lesser studied performance at the Royal College of Music in London, and composition at the University of Huddersfield. He is active as a composer, performer, lecturer and teacher. His music has been widely performed in Britain and Europe by Ensemble Aleph, Accroche Note, Linda Hirst, Ian Pace and others. As a performer he specialises in the music of the Twentieth century, vocal repertoire, and has given a number of world and British premieres.

On this CD he accompanies his wife, Clare, in Henze’s Being Beauteous.

Devant une neige,
un Étre de beauté de haute taille.
Des sifflements de mort et des cercles de musique sourde font monter, s’élargir et trembler comme un spectre ce corps adoré.

Les couleurs propres de la vie se foncent,
dansent, et se dégagent autour de la vision,
sur le chantier.
Des blessures écarlates et noires éclatent dans les chairs superbes.

Et les frissons s’élèvent et grondent,
et la saveur forcée de ces effets se chargeant avec les sifflements mortels et les raques musiques que le monde,
loin derrière nous, lance sur notre mère de beauté, – elle recule, elle se dresse.
Oh! nos os sont revêtus d’un nouveau corps amoureux.

O la face cendrée, l’écusson de crin,
les bras de cristal!

le canon sur lequel je dois m’abattre à travers
la mêlée des arbres et de l’air léger!

© 1963 B.Schott’s Söhne, Mainz; reproduced by permission)
Die sieben Plagen (1974)  Milko Kelemen (b. 1924)

Milko Kelemen was born in Croatia and studied with Olivier Messiaen and Wolfgang Fortner. His music has evolved from displaying the influences of folk music and neoclassicism in his earliest works to his use of microtonality, exotic colours and elements from music theatre that can be seen in his mature works, many of which are for the stage. Die sieben Plagen sets a text by Fernando Arrabal, which is based upon the biblical Seven Plagues of Egypt. It uses a huge range of vocal effects from lyrical singing, purring and croaking, to spitting, snoring and screaming, and has sections in four different languages.


These ten settings for unaccompanied female voice of texts from the first book of Georgics are arranged to form a seasonal progression from spring to winter and on to the return of spring again. The Virgil Settings are dedicated to Clare Lesser.

vos, o clarissima mundi lumina, labentem caelo quae ducitis annum,

Vere novo, gelidus canis cum montibus umor liquitur et Zephyro putis se glaeba resolvit,

cum se nex plurima silvis induet in florem et ramos curvabit olenlis:

Multa adeo gelida melius se nocte dedere, aut cum sole novo terras inroat Euos.

Nec minus ex imbri soles et aperta serena prospicere et certis poteris cognoscere signis:

Quid tempestates autumni et sidera dicam, atque, ubi iam breviorque dies mollior aestasas,

omnia ventorum concurrent proelia vidi, quae gravidam late segetum ab radicibus imis sublimen expulsam eruerunt,

frigida Saturni sese quo stella receptet, uos ignis caelo Cyllenius erret in orbis.

hic vertex nobis semper sublimis; at illum, sub pedibus styx atra videt Manesque profundi

vos, o clarissima mundi lumina, labentem caelo quae ducitis annum.
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