

CD REVIEW 10

BERLIOZ Les Nuits d'ete Op 7
MAHLER Five Songs from Das Knaben Wunderhorn
MAHLER Five Ruckert Songs (all arranged for chamber ensemble by Philip West).

Jan DeGaetani (mezzo),
Eastman Chamber Ensemble, David Effron.
Bridge BCD 9017 (DDD) 65.10

Profoundly beautiful.

Jan DeGaetani was a truly great mezzo soprano and a wonderful person, as I can testify. She was not demonstrative or arrogant, never a petulant or difficult prima donna; her voice was incomparable.

There are moments in the Berlioz that are unbelievably beautiful. Her sound is always natural; her intonation is perfect; her voice is pure and her communication skill is exemplary.

She was born in Massillon, Ohio on 10 July 1933 and studied at the Julliard School of Music in New York graduating in 1955. Her singing career began with various choral groups and then she began to work with Gilbert Kalish renowned for his championship of contemporary works. Great conductors admired her and Pierre Boulez, well-known for being ultra-fussy, said, "She was the greatest, and by many a mile."

For over thirty years she was unrivalled. Composers wrote for her including George Crumb (she premiered his Ancient Voices of Children), Elliott Carter and Richard Wernick.

Elliott Carter said, " She was undoubtedly America's finest singer. There nothing that she could not sing. The only thing she could not do was produce an ugly voice."

She was equally at home with Purcell, Gluck, Birtwhistle, Maxwell Davies, Charles Ives, Stephen Foster, Stravinsky and her performance of Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire is a classic and it is one of the most technically demanding works for voice. She was splendid in Renaissance Music, the baroque, French chanson, German lieder and opera.

What other singer can you compare her to... with her wide range of repertoire, all of which she performed well.

She was professor of voice at the Eastman School of Music and her students include Dawn Upshaw, Renee Fleming, Karen Holvik and William Sharp.

She married the oboist Philip West who made these arrangements which were recorded in Rochester a few months before her death on 15 September 1989 in Rochester, New York. She was 56 and had succumbed to leukaemia.

At the Alice Tully Hall in New York she performed Humphrey Searle's Contemplations Op 66 which was stunning in its clarity and line. Another fine singer Margaret Cable took up this work.

As to this disc, the last she made, listen to her lovely held notes in the Mahler so effortless and unforced. Marvel at the clarity of her diction, the faultless breath control and how she brings everything to life.

Not everyone will admire the reduced orchestration but it is better than the turgid overblown style of Mahler.



However, I am not convinced the chamber ensemble always suits the Berlioz.

I am not a fan of Mahler with his over-pronounced angst and I am reminded that his Fourth Symphony was once voted a disaster, but the wonderful singing that DeGaetani produces makes you want to hear them. The Ruckert songs are better than the Das Knaben Wunderhorn songs and the song Lod des hohen verstandes from Das Knaben Wunderhorn with its cuckoo and jackass is a truly awful song and not worthy of such a great artist.

For those who love a pure voice and immaculate singing this CD is a must for you. For me it was a rewarding and poignant reminder of America's greatest singer. I was moved to tears at many of her performances including Liszt's incredible song, Oh quand je dors.

Highly recommended.

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