

CD REVIEW 23

Jean SIBELIUS (1865-1957) Songs Volume 2:



Hymn to Thais.
Five Christmas Songs op. 1.
Eight Josephson Songs op.57.
Sangen om korsspindeln (King Christian II) op.27 no.4.
Four Songs op.72 nos.3-6.
Six Songs op.86.
Sma flickorna.

Recorded January 1994 in Stockholm. (DDD)
Monica Groop (mezzo) Love Derwinger (piano)
BIS-CD-657 [65.35]

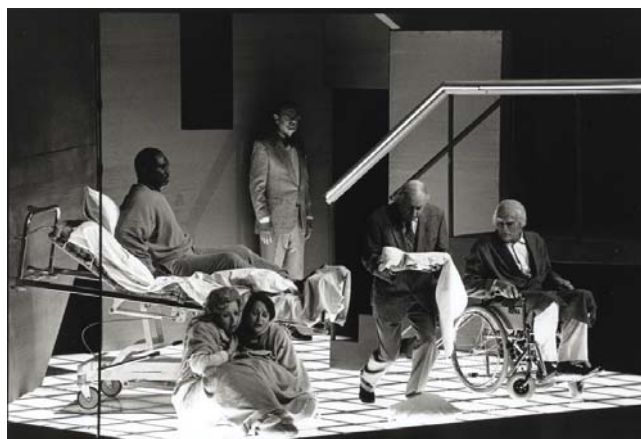
This is one of my favourite CDs of all time.

Monica Groop's voice is perfect and her interpretations are real, convincing and never extreme. She is a Finnish mezzo, with matchless contralto qualities, and studied at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki graduating in 1985. Two years later she made her opera debut with the Finnish Opera Company as Charlotte in Werther. She was a stunning success in the 1989 Cardiff Singer of the Year competition and later sang several Mozart roles in Europe.

She is not a limited singer or restricted in any way. She has sung Wagner under Haitink and the Composer in Ariadne auf Naxos in Paris under Armin Jordan. She is very fine indeed in early and baroque music as well as song cycles by Mahler, Debussy and Berlioz. She sang the contralto part in Messiah at a Prom a few years ago but the televised highlights did not include her solos!

Love Derwinger is a good pianist. He made his debut at 17 playing Liszt's formidable Second Piano Concerto. He is, in my opinion, preferable to Bengt Forsberg who accompanies Anne Sofie von Otter on other BIS CDs of Sibelius songs.

The first song to mention is The Fool's Song of the Spider Op 27 no.4 first performed in 1898, the only vocal number in the King Christian II Suite. It is eminently singable with a memorable vocal line combining nobility with earnestness. The piano part has excellent tonal contrast and filigree passages. The approaches to the musical climaxes are convincing.



This are the Five Christmas Songs, Op 1, written between 1895 and 1909. They are simple in design and some may think them slightly banal. The first song is secular, Christmas stands at the snowy gate. Groop captures the humour and she also captures the stillness of the subject in a clarity of diction that I can only wonder at. Now Christmas has Come has a warmth and spirituality with the comfort of a glowing and kind hearth. Outside it is growing dark is also beautifully sung with Groop's faultless diction and intonation and the piano part is well put across.

As the darkness lightens for Our Lord Jesus
Who came to lighten the world.

Give me no splendour, gold or pomp has become a popular carol in Finland which is surprising as it is rather slow. But it takes a great singer to sing slowly and not falter. Groop is perfect. High are the Snowdrifts is another simple song in five verses which may lack variation but it is beautifully realised.



The Eight Songs to texts by Ernst Josephson Op 57 are largely nature poems. Of course, Sibelius was a brilliant man interested in the sciences and nature. His magnificent elemental tone poem Tapiola is a clear indication of his love of nature. But to these songs. The River and the Snail has a splendid attack and Groop's rich low notes are simply stunning, really spine-tingling. In fact the clarity throughout her register is amazing and her voice, even in quiet passages, is never weak. The purity and intonation at the top of her range is also faultless. Listen for the humour as well - subtle and quite moving. A Flower stood by the wayside is a lovely song of a basic essential, friendship. The Mill Wheel has a fascinating pounding piano part. The turning wheel covered in tar becomes tired and the music changes. It is a song of much colour and we are reminded here of another one of Groop's qualities, her staggering breath control. Her gradual fading of notes, a very difficult discipline, is another dream. In May, Spring has come after the storms of winter. Women gossip more in the sunshine than they do freezing around a stove. This song has a satisfying onward motion and the final lines are truly memorable. I am a Tree talks of the naked tree in winter wanting to be covered by the cold white snow. You can feel the cold and those low penetrating notes are superb. Is there a hint of a funeral march? Duke Magnus is a difficult song to bring off as the parts are so diverse but, again, the changing colours add to its fascination although I have to say it is not one of my favourites. The Flower of Friendship reintroduces a previous theme. The balsam of a flower heals the wounds of the heart. This is a strong song of dark passion. Who could forget this vocal line and the superlative way it is realised? The Watersprite is a dramatic song with an obstinate piano part. It may hint at Schubert's Death and the Maiden.

Hymn to Thais is the only song Sibelius wrote in English. I am not sure this song works but it does capture an old style and has the favour of a hymnody. Thrill at Groop's top notes as I did. Very impressive.

The first two songs of the Six Songs Op 72 are lost and so we begin with number three, The Kiss, first performed in 1918.

Pass me the chalice of your lovely lips
Although the drink it gives me
Always, with the brightest joy, mixes

The torment of loss!
When you kiss, fresh as the west wind
Blowing across flowering meadows
Pretty a rose in bud, came to my
Captive Soul

The words are by Viktor Rydberg. That Sibelius set them, and other such tender songs, seems at variance with those awful pictures we see of Sibelius as a bald, menacing, forbidding individual. Yes, he did have a drink problem but, for a few years after the splendid Sixth Symphony, (what a great work that is) he was an abstainer. Later he went back to his brandy and cigars. He was a family man with five daughters who all adored him.

Note the variety in Groop's tone and how effective it is. The phrase 'Pretty as a rose in bud' is quite sublime but the whole performance is sheer perfection.

The Echo Nymph has a simplicity that is disarming where the cold Nordic sunlight is realised. Nor should we forget the very attentive and sensitive pianist who never sets out to dominate. Listen to how well Groop performs the echoes and her dramatic content is very thrilling. The Wayfarer and the Stream is a light and almost lively song. A Hundred Ways is solemn and human song... very deeply, deeply felt.

Great Creator forgive me
Good God, do not look upon me with anger,
Because, so often in your temple,
I also think of him!

The Six Songs Op. 86 date from 1916. The quality of them varies. Some songs are rather bare. Hidden Union and And There is a Thought, are slow and uneventful, although beautifully sung whereas The Coming of Spring has a strange joy and another memorable tune. Have we forgotten that Sibelius wrote good tunes?

Longing is my heritage is a song where again one marvels at its simplicity. The excellent communication skill that Groop has works with great conviction and in the difficult slow and sustained music she is never strained or under pressure.

Resound, O sorrowful strings
My companions in halls of dreams
Longing is my heritage
The castle in the valley of loss

Another memorable vocal line is in The Singer's Reward and Ye sister, Ye brothers almost dances.

The recital ends with The Little Girls - written in the style of a waltz. Infectious! Great fun!

A marvellous CD. Agreed not all the songs are gems but the singer is! Definitely one of my desert island discs.

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