

## CD REVIEW 66

### MAHLER

#### **Kindertotenlieder;**

#### **Rückert Lieder;**

#### **Lieder eines fahrenden gessellen.**

Katarina Karneus (mezzo)

Gothenburg SO, Susanna Malkki.

BIS-SACD-1600 (64.17).



I do not know why this CD has come to me for review, since I am not an admirer of Mahler.

But CDs can be reviewed from more than one perspective.

What a voice. Karneus is a tremendous singer and to watch her is another revelation and a rewarding one. There are no histrionics, no playing to the gallery and she is focused and still. Pity other singers do not have these qualities.

Gustav Mahler was born in Bohemia of a Jewish family on 7 July 1860. He graduated from the Vienna Conservatory in 1878 and, eventually, became a conductor in many of the opera houses in Europe... he spent more time on the podium than at a desk composing.

After some failed relationships, Mahler married Alma Schindler in March 1903. He set the Kindertotenlieder (Songs on the death of children) in 1901 and 1904 respectively, and they were first performed in 1905. Two years later, one of his daughters, Maria, died of scarlet fever.

Friedrich Rückert (1788-1966) was not a top-flight poet, but was better known as a translator of Oriental languages, being a master of many languages. I would like to know why he wrote these sad poems.

Not only are the poems depressing, so is the music which is full of angst. Many Mahlerians have said that Mahler wanted listeners both to know and share in his black pessimism, and, later, to share in his unabated misery. The music inhabits anger, fear, anxiety and bitterness and twenty six minutes of mainly dreary slow music is hard to take.

But the singing is magnificent.

The writer of the sleeve notes likens Mahler to Schubert but not, I hope, as to the music, but as to the depressing poems and equally depressing music as you have in Schubert's Die Schone Mullerin and Die Winterreise.

Such unrelenting misery is subject to the law of diminishing returns. The music yields less than the production and fame that the composer intended.

The angst is not only fear and anxiety but feelings of intense apprehension and inner turmoil. It may refer to persecution and misplaced paranoia. A friend, who is psychiatrist, calls Mahler's misery "possessing no hope and dangerous to both mental health and well-being".

The Latin word for such angst is clogging or choking.

But I must reiterate what superlative singing we have here and what a voice!

Mahler was not a nice man. He had a plethora of problems, many of which were self-afflicted! Like Karajan, Barbirolli and Solti, he was often cruel and extremely abusive to his orchestras and to soloists. Such tyrants and narcissistic conductors are not wanted and, as it has been said, vanity is not a prerequisite for being a good conductor.

To add to this, Mahler was influenced by German philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the extreme atheist and the man who led campaigns against morality and decency.

Although he had some success in Prague, Mahler was disliked and even hated because of his conducting methods and his foul-mouthed abuse of musicians, orchestral players, other conductors and music producers. But he also suffered from overwork which increased his temper and lack of social skills. He inspired more hatred than respect! And his brother, Otto, committed suicide.

In two separate surveys of symphonies, surveys conducted during the first ten years of this century, Mahler's Symphonies numbers 4 and 9 were voted, along with the two Elgar symphonies, as the most disliked symphonies.

The Symphony no 4 lacks contrast in content, tempi and rhythm and conjures up pictures of big, beefy, blond Germans swigging beer, write many musicians! That may be a little unfair!

That the Symphony no 9 is long-winded and painfully tedious is a generally held view!

Of the Kindertotenlieder, it is only the last song, In the Weather, that tries to escape the doom-laden music that precedes it. The previous material has some delicate orchestration and one should be glad that the music does not have the usual Mahlerian bombast!

The Songs of a Wayfarer is a much better work with texts by the composer. They are sunnier pieces and have a greater interest. The Ruckert Lieder vary in quality but, again, are basically dark and melancholic.

But we not only judge the music, but the sound quality and the performances. I have dealt with the quality of the music, the sound is excellent but I have some reservations about the conducting but have no reservations whatsoever about the soloist who is first rate.

I cannot praise Karneus highly enough! Her singing is flawless, mercurial and individual... a voice of amazing clarity and accuracy. Now let us hear her in some more rewarding music!



Mahler fans will love this and this CD could be destined to be a best-seller because of this really classy singing!

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