

Refractions

Valen, Messiaen, Webern, Berg

Berit Norbakken Solset, s; Norwegian Soloists' Choir & Radio Orchestra, Oslo Sinfonietta/ Grete Pedersen

BIS 1970 [SACD] 58 minutes

Fartein Valen's 'Ave Maria' is a colorful, hyper-romantic setting, lush and full of strangely shifting harmonies and caressing melodic lines. 'How Fair Thou Art' is a motet, a love poem to the Son of God that borrows some phrases from the Song of Solomon written to the Shulamite. There's ecstasy in it as well, but the harmonies are more angular. This is the first time Valen's 'Psalm 121' has been recorded in its original orchestration. According to the notes, it was the composer's first attempt to break through the Brahmsian haze typical of the time, but it is still redolent of Brahms, down to borrowing some of the same timpani patterns heard in the *German Requiem*.

On the technical side, there's what sounds like a *very* obvious splice right at the beginning of Messiaen's *Cinq Rechants*. I have yet to work up an appreciation for this cycle, but the performers are convincing. There's almost no vibrato, though—another surprise. 'O Sacrum Convivium' is reverent and polished, a real delight. Webern's 'Escape on Light Boats', Op. 2, has an incredible sense of forward motion in the full harmonies; the Two Songs, Op. 19, are made of his more familiar pointillism. 'The Nightingale', from Berg's *Seven Early Songs*, is here in Clytus Gottwald's arrangement for a cappella voices. I much prefer the instrumental accompaniment to hearing it handled by voices—the texture is too homogenous, and having words combined with the figurations makes for a clunky sound.

This was recorded in Ris Kirke in Oslo, and there is plenty of ambience, but not too lengthy of a decay. The musicians are all fine—everything is very cleanly presented. Notes are in English, Norwegian, German, and French, with texts in the original languages and in English translation.

ESTEP

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