

Refractions

New CD/SACD


Berg Sieben frühe Lieder – No. 3, Die Nachtigall (arr. Clytus Gottwald)^a.

Messiaen Cinq Rechants^a. O sacrum convivium^a.

Valen Ave Maria, Op. 4^{bd}. How fair thou art, Op. 12^a. Come rain from on high, refresh the earth, Op. 25^{ac}. Psalm 121^{ad}.

Webern Entflieht auf leichten Kähnen, Op. 2^a. Zwei Lieder, Op. 19^{ac}.

^aNorwegian Soloists' Choir/**Grete Pedersen** with ^b**Berit Norbakken Solset** (soprano); members of the ^cOslo Sinfonietta; ^dNorwegian Radio Orchestra.

BIS SACD1970 (full price, 58 minutes). French/German/Latin/Norwegian texts and English translations included. Website www.bis.se  Producer Jens Braun. Engineer Ingo Petry. Dates November 2011 and May 2012.

Now in its 63rd year, the Norwegian Soloists' Choir has long evinced mastery across the broadest repertoire – not least in 'Refractions', its fourth recording for BIS, which brings together choral music by three of the last century's most important composers, along with the choral arrangement of a song by one who is otherwise regrettably unrepresented in the medium.

Messiaen wrote only two works for a *cappella* voices, of which the latter ranks among his most original creations. Set to the composer's own texts, which combine their surrealist flights of fancy with phrases variously in Sanskrit and Quechua, *Cinq Rechants* (1948) is the final part of his trilogy centred on the legend of Tristan and Iseult – though compared to the opulent *Turangalila* symphony which preceded it, the scoring for 12 solo voices could not be more contrasted in its sheer transparency. This does not lessen the present work's textural intricacy or its harmonic and rhythmic complexity which looks forward to Messiaen's radical innovations over the following decade. By contrast, the motet *O sacrum convivium* (1937) fulfils an inherently liturgical function and is the nearest its composer came to writing conventional sacred choral music, though this is hardly to deny the subtlety with which Messiaen handles the simple strophic form, or the inward transcendence invested into one of the shortest pieces within an output that is all, to a greater or lesser degree, religious.

Transcendence, albeit on a more abstractly spiritual plane, is the key to both of Webern's choral pieces included here. The anthem *Entflieht auf leichten Kähnen* (1908) is the setting of a typically ethereal poem by Stefan George whose canonic intricacy does not lessen its expressive eloquence, while *Zwei Lieder* (1926) sets two of Goethe's most elliptical poems in music that similarly offsets its technical complexity (this is among the composer's earliest serial pieces) with a strophic formal directness; both of the latter being enhanced by the addition of a mixed instrumental quintet. By contrast, Clytus

Gottwald's arrangement of 'Die Nachtigall' (1907) deftly renders this most appealing of Berg's early songs into idiomatic choral terms.

The remainder of the miscellany is devoted to Fartein Valen, whose choral works are an easily overlooked though integral aspect of an output whose significance has only increased in the six decades since his death. The two motets (from 1930 and 1937 respectively) are both settings of texts by eighteenth-century theologian Hans Adolph Brorson – the former, for mixed voices, as bracingly astringent as the latter, for women's voices discreetly underpinned by clarinet, is thoughtfully eloquent. A pity Valen's remaining motets could not have been included (maybe on a future BIS disc from this source?) – not least as his setting of *Ave Maria* (1921), while exquisitely sung here, seems undeniably out of context. Conversely, the inclusion of *Psalm 121* (1911), recorded for the first time in its original orchestral guise, fills almost the last gap in the Valen discography: written when the composer was studying with Bruch, its outwardly post-Schumann idiom is texturally enriched by soprano and vocal quartet, while its climactic fugue anticipates the tonal explorations of Reger and beyond.

The superbly spacious and natural recording, together with a booklet note by Arnulf Christian Mattes which draws one's attention to unsuspected connections between these composers, enhances the attractions of this disc. While the works by Webern and Messiaen are easily obtainable elsewhere, the uniqueness of this programme is assuredly its own justification.

Richard Whitehouse