

The Paths of Love

Dvořák Gypsy Songs, B104 (Op. 55). Eben The Most Secret Songs. Janáček Moravian Folk Poetry in Songs, JW V/2 - excerpts. Kunc Kačenka Stood on the Danube's Shore, Op. 14. Martinů Songs on One Page, H294. Songs on Two Pages, H302. Ostrčil Orphan Child, Op. 9. Andrea Kalivodová (mezzo); Ladislava Vondráčková (piano).

Areo Diva UP0135-2 (full price, 1 hour 6 minutes).
Czech texts and English translations included.
Website www.arcodiva.cz Producer Jiří Stilec.
Engineers Václav Roubal, Karel Soukeník. Date Live performances at the Hotel Gustav Mahler, Jihlava on June 3rd, 2011.

The song repertory of the Czech lands seems still to be less well known abroad than the symphonic and operatic repertory, which makes this an interesting recital, one taken from a concert given, appropriately, in Jihlava, on the boundary between Bohemia and Moravia. Andrea Kalivodová claims a relationship with both regions and traditions, as well as with Gypsy folklore, in a well-chosen programme on the general theme of love. This, of course, gives her plenty of scope. She is lively with the lighter songs and her strong, clear mezzo-soprano, only sometimes troubled by a too-prominent vibrato, has a fruity, even resinous low register and an expressive warmth for the more dramatic pieces.

The most striking among these is *Osiřelo dítě* (*Orphan Child*) by Otakar Ostrčil. Dating from 1906, it is in manner a throwback to the spooky ballads of early German Romanticism, such as *Erlkönig*, and tells of a child visiting the grave of its mother and bewailing its treatment at the hands of a rough new stepmother; mother's ghost comes to claim the child, and the two are buried together. Though Ostrčil was a keen supporter of modern Czech composers, his own style here is more generally Central European and traditional. Kalivodová sings it graphically and with conviction, and she is well supported, in what was originally an orchestral accompaniment, by Ladislava Vondráčková.

However, the two sound better at ease with a more modern version of the grim ballad genre, by the Moravian Jan Kunc (1883-1976). This draws on more contemporary and local influences (including touches of Janáček) for the tale of a girl who murders her illegitimate child and then chooses to die for her fugitive lover rather than accept the creepy advances of the hangman. A still more original talent, which deserves wider appreciation, is that of Petr Eben (1929-2007). His cycle *Písně nejtajnější* (*The Most Secret Songs*) is eclectic in its influences, which include chant and folk song on music setting words by Czech and Persian poets, but are strongly and subtly imagined and very well written for the voice. Eben himself provides a short poem for one of the most touching of the songs, one of parting ('Loučení').

Janáček himself is represented by seven of the 15 songs he contributed to the popular collection of *Moravian Folk Poetry in Songs*, giving them sharp and perceptive accompaniments. They are not of great moment, but it is interesting to hear how acutely he can respond even to a simple little number, 'Lavečka' ('The little bench'), about how the seat where the lovers used to meet, like their feelings for one another has now broken. Others are just as sharply observed; these were the years in the 1890s, after the fairly conventional *Šárka*, as he approached *Jenůfa*. More conventional are, not surprisingly, the songs in the group most familiar to English audiences, Dvořák's *Gypsy Songs*, which Kalivodová sings without any of the sentimentality which the Natalia Macfarren translations printed in the booklet invite, even when we come to 'Songs My Mother Taught Me'. Though Dvořák was never very close to the gypsy song, they sound fresh and a long way from the Victorian drawing room in Kalivodová's hands.

Kalivodová also does well by Martinů's *Songs on One Page* (and the subsequent *Songs on Two Pages*). As the general titles suggest, these are fleeting fancies, but they are skilfully composed and the rapidly shifting rhythms are tricky. Kalivodová brings them off nicely, with only a couple of skids at tricky corners, and makes the most of them with considerable charm of phrasing. That her charms are also visual can be seen on a cover photograph in which, though decorously posed, she is bold enough to be seated entirely unclad.

John Warrack