Rafael Kubelik conducts Bartók: Bluebeard's Castle

aud 95.626

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International Record Review (Nigel Simeone - 2014.09.01)

RECORD REVIEW

It should be obvious from the list of selected comparisons that Bluebeard's Castle is a work that has done extremely well on record: the classic Kertész recording sounds amazingly good for its age, and Ludwig and Berry are an engrossing pair of soloists. I can't make any useful comment on their sung Hungarian except to say that it sounds credible, but in terms of singing they are both magnificent, and Ludwig has one of the best top Cs of anyone at the opening of the Fifth Door. The Fischer recording, originally on Philips but reissued (and superbly remastered) by Channel Classics, is probably the outstanding modern version in Hungarian, with two involving and idiomatic soloists. The recording in English by Sally Burgess and John Tomlinson, with the Opera North Orchestra conducted by Richard Fames, is another striking success – and hearing such a conversational opera sung in English is pretty much all gain as far as I'm concerned. I want to have it in Hungarian too, of course, but listening to it in English adds a degree of dramatic involvement that makes the whole experience even more intense – not least because this is also such a well-sung and well-played performance too, conducted with blazing commitment and attention to detail by Farnes.

So where does this newcomer – in fact more than half a century old – fit into the scheme of things? Recorded live at the Lucerne Festival in 1962, it's sung in German, which may put some people off, but honestly doesn't worry me when the singing has such conviction. Second, it has the benefit of Rafael Kubelik's conducting. Devotees of this piece may know his live recording made in 1981 with the New York Philharmonic with Tatiana Troyanos and Sigmund Nimsgern (it was included in a box of broadcast performances issued by the orchestra). He's a wonderful conductor of this work: never overdoing the drama, but underlining the turning points with the utmost sensitivity and an acute ear for telling details – and his sense of dramatic timing and pacing is unerring.

Then there's the singing: Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau is on magnificent form, bringing a kind of world-weary resignation to Bluebeard's ever more chilling revelations, and doing so in resonant voice. There's no barking or hectoring, but some very clear diction and complete involvement in the role. Irmgard Seefried is rather an unexpected choice of Judith. A stunning Mozart and Strauss singer, she's not always comfortable in this role – and, be warned, her top C is a sort of strangled shriek. And yet, the sense that she is in a situation from which there can be no escape is tangible, and terrifying. Her singing near the end has devastating poignancy. Incidentally, the spoken prologue is omitted.

The Swiss Festival Orchestra plays admirably and the broadcast sound is acceptable – it has been very carefully restored by audite for this release. The notes include an interesting essay on the performance, but the absence of a libretto is to be regretted.

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What matters more than the language or the slightly boxy sound is the tangible intensity of this Bluebeard's Castle, and that makes it a version that really has to be heard.

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