Rafael Kubelik conducts Bartók: Bluebeard's Castle

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Gramophone (2014.09.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Gripping Bluebeard

Bartók's Duke Bluebeard's Castle is in essence about the inscrutability of an older man and the burning curiosity of a younger woman, an opera that's very difficult to cast and even more tricky to pace, given the risk of sinking into a lugubrious tonal quagmire. And yet, given a conductor of Rafael Kubelik's calibre, there's scope for a gripping inner narrative – provided the singers fit their roles, which in this case they most certainly do.

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau twice recorded Bluebeard commercially, but in concert any sense of propriety is thrown to the winds and he sounds (and sings) the part as never before on disc, commanding, compassionate, occasionally impatient and with a macho swagger to the voice that suits the role to a T. Irmgard Seefried on the other hand is the most girlish, innocent-sounding Judith I've ever heard, the opposite of, say, Jessye Norman (the most regal Judith on disc), impressionable rather than vulnerable, though when Bluebeard flings open the door to his vast kingdom she intones a rather shortbreathed top C. Kubelik is magnificent, cueing his Swiss Festival Orchestra players to etch each scene with bold primary colours, even the mournful lake of tears. The climaxes are overwhelming (especially Judith's internment), even though heard through rather over-resonant sound. Not perfect by any means (and there are no ghostly voices) but wonderful!

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