

record of the week

6 György Kurtág: *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*

Tony Arnold / Gábor Csalog

BMC CD 279

Five years in the making, completed over half a century ago, and for a long time Kurtág's biggest work (of half-programme length), *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* stands like a mountain, one presenting almost vertical cliff-faces. It was recorded by the artists who gave the first performance, the soprano Erika Sziklay and pianist Loránt Szűcs, but has drawn few other climbers. According to the documentation that comes with this new recording, Tony Arnold was invited to give a performance in Budapest in 2017, the first in two decades, and to repeat the work in the studio just over a year later. That a Hungarian institution (the Budapest Music Center) – and a notoriously demanding Hungarian composer – should have chosen a U.S. singer says much about Arnold's abilities and sensitivities, among which is a crucial command of the language. Gábor Csalog would always have been the go-to pianist for such a venture.

The result is a huge achievement, that leaves one properly hammered but also fortified. Kurtág does not ease his challenge; he thrusts it straight away – at the singer, at the pianist, and most certainly at the listener – in a four-minute tirade of wild vocal leaps in which song is contorted towards snarls, yelps, groans, punctuated and propelled by hot alarm from the piano. This is the first of four movements making up what the composer calls a “concerto” for soprano and piano, using the term in the sense of the sacred concertos of Heinrich Schütz – for *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza* is indeed a sacred work, or else a storming battle to test out just what a sacred work might be in modern times, a work that, in and through the words of a sixteenth-century preacher, takes hold of sin and death, the subjects of its middle movements, to end by wondering about the illusions of redemption. Arnold goes at all of this full-frontal. Her recording is prefaced by one of Kurtág himself reading the entire text, but though this prologue is a sound document cherishable as a talisman of the composer's presence with us, now past his ninety-fifth birthday, and surely to be invaluable to future singers of the work, all the meaning is delivered by Arnold's performance. To give just some examples of single words, “undokságát” conveys the full sense of “odiousness” in those two final drawn-out syllables; “restség” (idleness) has a first syllable stretching out in contemptuous unconcern; “felindul” (starts up) slips out as a trickle of seeming innocuousness; “hiszi” (above), appearing at two signal junctures in the final movement, is a whisper of simultaneous hope and doubt. All the resolution of the work is

here, in this one quiet word voiced from outside the closed doors of paradise.

Different kinds of expertise and commitment are required of the pianist; there is not the corporeal involvement that comes across vividly in this recording when Arnold is singing unaccompanied and her initial inhalations are drawn into the music. Nevertheless, Csalog's intensity of sound and gesture builds to what one might call an intensity of form in the two long sections that are mostly solos for the piano. In the last movement's third segment, desperate – and beautiful – melancholy is confronted by violence that turns out to be melancholy in another guise. Earlier there is a gently, poignantly sustained seven-minute song of mourning.

Exquisiteness is power. Sadness is grace. Rhetoric spirals in on itself.

Paul Griffiths, 21.03.17.