

Paul Griffiths

# Solitary Islands

New Releases by BMC: Kurtág, Ligeti and Liszt

A clutch of recent releases from Budapest Music Center includes a first chance for most of us to hear something from György Kurtág's ninth decade. Famously hesitant in earlier years—when he turned fifty his catalogue did not extend beyond Op. 12—Kurtág has been accelerating with age. Lately there have been *Brefs messages* for nine players (his Op. 47) as well as smaller instrumental pieces, all emerging in the interstices of a long delayed opera: a setting of Beckett's *Fin de partie*.

The composition on the new disc (BMC CD 162) is *Four Poems by Anna Akhmatova*, which he set for soprano and ensemble as his Op. 41, a score he finished in 2008 for a première in New York on January 31, 2009—and it is this first performance that is recorded here, along with other pieces from the concert, given in the Zankel auditorium of Carnegie Hall: Kurtág's *Troussova*, and his friend Ligeti's *Melodien* and Cello Concerto. (The programme also included a third work by each composer: Kurtág's *Splinters* and Ligeti's *With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles*.) Péter Eötvös conducts the UMZE Ensemble, with Miklós Perényi in the Ligeti concerto and Natalia Zagorinskaya in both *Troussova* and the new cycle, which Kurtág dedicated to her.

One hardly needs to hear *Troussova* on the same album to recognize that the Akhmatova songs come from a different Kurtág—in terms of the smoothness of the vocal line and the centredness of the harmony, with a lot of motivic repetition and strong hints of folksong modalities—but also from very much the same composer, where the immediacy of expression and the almost tastable instrumental colours are concerned. The new vocal character brings forward

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memories of Stravinsky's Japanese and Russian songs, especially in the first and second numbers, both of which are brief (1' 20" and about twice that), the latter also having very Stravinskian appoggiaturas. Kurtág here enfolds the voice—or illuminates it, or represents an illumination radiating from it—with an ensemble of woodwinds, strings and percussion (including piano and cimbalom), constantly changing in timbre but swimming through time with the vocal line.

The third song, as long as the other two put together, takes us into more familiar Kurtágian territory, not only in repeating the trio of violin (often scratching the ceiling), cimbalom and double bass from *Scenes from a Novel* but also in being a funeral flower. There is the cold air of a cemetery here, continuing to the end, where—after tubular bells have poignantly echoed the last line of the poem—a succession of muffled chimes suggests also a favourite Kurtág image out of Bartók, a lake of tears.

Similar in length, the final song moves onto a larger, louder plane. Brass join the ensemble, stimulating a wilder anxiety in the vocal line, but then everything dies back to the essentials: the almost numb voice, at once serene and alert, and the gathering of instruments around it. The trajectory, through four poems all about poets, has come from playful bewilderment to a stark vision of "the poet in disgrace" at work within a frozen city. Placed here, after death, this final song seems to remind and warn us of art's immortality, of how the artist can still speak, and bear witness, from beyond the grave.

By contrast with *Troussova*, where the singing voice is closely identified with the suffering persona of Rimma Dalos's poems, the Akhmatova cycle puts forward a more elusive vocal personality—more abstract, perhaps, but perhaps also more telling. We are not observers, now, of someone's distress. Rather, this is distress, expressed at one moment with hair-raising shock.

Audience noises are acceptable in such a vivid memento of an important occasion, an occasion given further lustre by a beautiful performance of Ligeti's *Melodien* and an account of his Cello Concerto in which Perényi's wonderful playing is matched in tone and sensibility by his colleagues.

**E**ötvös had Ligeti's music in front of him earlier that winter in Cologne, and another disc (BMC CD 166) perpetuates some of the results: a thrilling and powerful performance of the Requiem, framed by *Apparitions* and *San Francisco Polyphony*. Like the extremities of register out to which Ligeti filters his music at points in various works (including the Cello Concerto and the Requiem), the categories of wild humour and cold solemnity in many of his pieces reinforce one another, as this account of the Requiem marvellously shows. Comedy is incipient, for instance, in the Kyrie, beneath, below and maybe even within the more prominent awesomeness, which is vividly communicated by the choir and also by the orchestra, in fused tones that sound like metallic resonances held in time. Conversely, strangeness and loss haunt the following movement, along

with the musical slapstick with which the *Dies Irae* text is delivered. Barbara Hannigan's floating high notes here, whether pianissimo or forceful, are extraordinary, like beams of light suspended in the air with no source visible. Altogether the movement has the drama and colour of an opera collapsed into nine minutes, after which the glowing ashes of the final *Lacrimosa* are all the more poignant.

The two accompanying orchestral works are Ligeti's most neglected, and fine, characterful new recordings of them (only the third in nearly four decades in the case of *San Francisco Polyphony*) are welcome. In this context, and in these performances, connections with the Requiem come to the fore, whether incidental, as with the bundling of the brass out through the door in *Apparitions* and the luminous stacked tritones in *San Francisco Polyphony*, or general, a matter of dramatic, even operatic punch.

**A**long with these important expositions of recent and very recent music come three discs brought out to mark the Liszt bicentenary, one of them devoted to a repertory that still seems new, or at least unassimilated: piano works from the composer's last few years (BMC CD 185). One can find pre-echoes in these pieces of Scriabin, Bartók (not least in the big *Csárdás macabre*, with its stamping rhythms and surprising pentatonic episodes) or Ravel (*Quatrième Valse oubliée*), but of course all these composers were unknown to the aging Liszt, who seems to have been in an island of time all his own. It was a small island. Certain features—especially diminished harmonies and other tritonal elements—recur in piece after piece, and one may not want to listen to the whole seventy-minute programme at one go. It is, nevertheless, an island that remains unfamiliar, and some of its flora—the *Bagatelle sans tonalité*, which disappears itself out of existence, or *La Lugubre Gondola*, of which both versions are offered here—are remarkable after no matter how many hearings.

The pianist is Adrienne Krausz, whose cool approach may in its way be as surprising as her splendid virtuoso control. In the march of *Unstern!*, for example, she is straight to the point of baldness. But one sees the point. A lot of musicians perform Liszt's weirdness as the expression of weirdness, as if pointing out to us all the time how untoward this music is. Krausz, by contrast, just lets it happen—or rather, of course, she makes it happen, while having it seem that the notes themselves, not her hands and mind behind them, are responsible for these bizarre musical zooms and somersaults. She commands great resources of colour and nuance, from delicacy to imposing strength and starkness, but makes it appear all through that the music is in charge. The record's beautiful *envoi* is the sweet and strange, melancholy and whimsical *En Rêve*, magical.

Greater rarities are included in the two albums of pieces for men's choir, some of these settings apparently unrecorded before. They are all ably put

forth by a group directed by Tamás Bubnó, the Saint Ephraim Male Choir, whose singing is rhythmically strong and thoroughly in tune without eliminating the characters of particular voices, their various tangs helped forward by the close recording. The selections are divided between secular (BMC CD 168) and sacred (BMC CD 178) compilations, and there are choice pieces on both.

The only overlap with Krausz's album in point of period is provided by a *Pax vobiscum* of 1885, decisively affirming how important repetition became to Liszt in his last years while of course having a quite different harmonic character from that of the contemporary piano pieces, whose message is not one of peace. In other ways, though, these choral works, the German as well as the Latin, convey an image in accordance with that of the late piano music, an image of statelessness, unrootedness, solitariness—qualities that make Liszt of any period a peculiarly modern spirit.

Bubnó builds his sacred programme around the mass Liszt reworked for a performance at Szekszárd that failed to take place; organ solos as introit and recessional, together with interleaved motets, give the semblance of a "Liszt liturgy". Those aforementioned traits make the result coherent, however varied, but if there is one piece that stands out, it is the eucharistic prayer *Anima Christi, sanctifica me*. This suggests how Liszt's respect for plainsong worked in alliance with his harmonic venturesomeness (as in Bruckner's sacred music, which Liszt's occasionally recalls) and also how his devotion to the Church by no means led him to silence his devotion to contemporary opera.

The secular collection, which includes the twelve items published in 1861 under the title *Für Männergesang* and three other pieces, offers several further gems, interspersed with lusty march-tempo numbers. "Es rufet Gott", to a text set twice in the 1861 group, has a striking idea, again circling in repetition, and "Der Gang um Mitternacht" is an atmospheric nocturne that counterpoises unison with chordal singing. Two short Goethe songs also stand out: "Gottes ist der Orient" and "Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh". Besides the pleasure these recordings give, they will surely stimulate other choirs to investigate this little known region of the Lisztian continent. ♣