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KURTÁG: *The Sayings of Péter Bornemisza*

CD Arnold; Csalog, piano. Text and translation. BMC CD 279



THIS IS AN ABSOLUTE beast of a song cycle by Hungarian composer György Kurtág. His subtitle, “Concerto for Soprano and Piano,” indicates the extraordinary challenge it poses to the artists, as does the fact that it’s very rarely performed; this is the first new commercial recording in more than forty years. American vocalist Tony Arnold has courageously risen to the impossible task, apparently not without emotional sacrifice. The liner notes relate that she was pushed to tears by the composer’s uncompromising demands, both in the score and during his coaching sessions.

Written between 1963 and 1968, the work sets sermons by the sixteenth-century Lutheran bishop Péter Bornemisza. Kurtág’s aphoristic treatment of the passages he’s excerpted anticipates the miniature scale of his later style. But there’s also a grand sweep to the hourlong cycle, which progresses Dante-like from the trials of faith to a vision of redemption. The opening “Confession,” in which Bornemisza likens life’s temptations to a horde of little demons, plunges the listener into a hellish soundscape. Pianist Gábor Csalog sits quivering on a single note, suddenly breaking out in a virtuoso fit of hysterics that has him writhing up and down the keyboard. It takes at least three repeat listens before you start to acclimate to the musical language. But compared to the abstract impenetrability of other twelve-tone fare from this period, there’s an unexpected accessibility in Kurtág’s application of serialism in service of vivid word-painting. Bornemisza’s fire-and-brimstone imagery and endless strings of adjectives offer ample opportunity. Csalog is even able to conjure the stink of a metaphorical dung heap with astringent dissonances that practically prick at your nose.

In spite of the source material, Arnold never comes off as preaching. Instead, the intensity of her delivery suggests she’s suffering the torments she describes. In the brief movement that opens the “Death” sermon, she traverses an opera’s worth of emotion in the space of twelve seconds—breathy desperation, barking rage, wailing grief and a final scream of existential terror. While Arnold admirably throws herself into the *Erwartung*-like turbulence of the vocal line, she occasionally lacks the precision and flexibility to maneuver its pinpoint coloratura. Still, her overall interpretation is preferable to Erika Sziklay’s technically perfect but coldly detached reading on the premiere recording from 1977. There’s genuine humanity in the way Arnold half-mutters Bornemisza’s instructions on proper burial, her reassuring tone like one consoling a graveside widow. Such moments show a connection to the text that’s quite astonishing when you consider she’s not a native Hungarian speaker; you’d never tell from her idiomatic pronunciation. By far, Arnold’s most miraculous feat is to tease out the spirit of religious joy latent in the concluding “Spring” section. The angular a cappella melisma that heralds this finale is splendidly shaped and crowned by glorious top notes that call to mind the blast of a shofar or some triumphant Handelian fanfare. —Joe Cadagin