

## Ernest Krenek – The 3 Opera Set (2004)

Written by bluesever  
Sunday, 24 May 2015 16:00 -

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Disc 1 *Der Diktator* (Tragische Oper in 1 Akt) op. 49 1 *Vorspiel / Prelude (Erstes Bild)* 0:57  
2 *Wie schön die Welt ist heute!* 4:37 3 *Ich habe Angst* 2:10 4 *Ah! Luft! Luft!* 3:23 5  
*Blind, ganz blind?* 2:21 6 *Zwischenspiel / Intermezzo* 1:56 7 *Ich werde noch arbeiten*  
(Zweites Bild) 1:49 8 *Ich habe Sie erwartet* 4:13 9 *Du bist viel größer, als ich dachte* 2:21  
10 *Halt ein* 2:28 Schwergewicht

oder *Die Ehre der Nation* (Burleske Operette in 1 Akt) op. 55

11 *Vorspiel / Prelude* 1:14 12 *Ach genug! Ich will jetzt frühstücken* 5:01 13 *Ich heiße Anna*  
*Maria Himmelhuber, mein Vater ist Prodekan* 2:17 14 *Ich heiße Anna Maria Himmelhuber*  
*und studiere* 5:02 15 *Schuft, was machst du?* 2:14

Disc 2 *Das Geheime Königreich* (Märchenoper in 1 Akt) op. 50

1 *Ah! Nieder der König!* (Erstes Bild) 4:39 2 *Ich bin's nicht wert* 3:42 3 *Das kann nur in*  
*deinem Königreich gescheh'n!* 2:30 4 *Höret jetzt meinen Schwur* 2:28 5 *Und sperrtet ihr in*  
*tausend Keller mich* 4:21 6 *Tempo giusto* 2:00 7 *Was sind eure Reize matt!* 2:47 8 *Nein,*  
*nein! Durch diese Tür kommt ihr nicht!* 1:45 9 *Im Namen dieses heiligen Kronreifs* 2:56 10  
*Zwischenspiel / Intermezzo* 3:26 11 *Meine Füße tragen mich nicht weiter* (Zweites Bild) 3:08  
12 *Sinnlos, sinnlos schleich ich in dem Wald* 2:46 13 *So werd ich nicht sterben?* 4:04 14  
*Wie ist mir leicht* 3:38

With: Celina Lindsay, Urban Malmberg, Claudia Barainsky, Michael Kraus, Gabriele Maria Ronge, Robert Worle, Bogna Bartosz, Roland Bracht, Pär Lindskog and Daniel Kirch The Rias Chamber Chorus German Symphony Orchestra Berlin Marek Janowski, director

During the 1920's, young Ernst Krenek wrote three short operas on texts he created himself which are presented for the first time on CD: the serious and tragic war opera "The Dictator", the fairy tale opera "The Secret Kingdom", and the satirical opera "Heavyweight or The Nation's Honor". Each of the three works shows Krenek as a natural born composer for the stage, unconventionally and effectively mastering the most diverse idioms. Beautifully conceived, the 2 CD set comes with an 80 page booklet, complete with libretto in German, French and English and notes and essays. Following his successful recording of Strauss' music for the film "Der Rosenkavalier" (Capriccio 60097), Marek Janowski directs the German Symphony Orchestra Berlin.

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Ernst Krenek was a most inconsistent composer. Not only did he adopt a new musical personality every few years, but also he produced works good and bad in each style. As music director at opera houses in Kassel and Wiesbaden in the mid 1920s, he abandoned his former dissonance-laden, often atonal ways to produce art for the public. The immediate outcome was his “jazz opera” *Jonny spielt auf*, which proved the biggest hit of the era, performed in over 100 cities and translated into 18 languages. Immediately thereafter he began this trilogy of one-acts, into which he poured his usual inconsistency.

The Dictator is a clichéd tragedy: Maria, devastated by her husband’s war wounds, comes to assassinate the egotistical, amoral dictator who is responsible for her woes and those of the world. Note the 1926 date: this is Mussolini, not Hitler. Charlotte, the dictator’s wife, is fed up with his making wars and fears for his life. Maria, gun in hand, is instantly seduced by his charisma. Charlotte (hidden behind the arras) takes up the pistol in a jealous rage to shoot him, but Maria steps forward to intercept the fatal bullet, as her blind husband enters to ask if the deed is done. Krenek’s conventional music adds nothing to this shallow tale, offering no clue as to why Maria should fall for this dullard of a monster. The women sing well, especially Gabriele Ronge as Maria, but Urban Malmberg’s baritone is too weak to make the dictator believable. The finest singing actors could not turn this ugly frog into a prince. *Heavyweight or The Glory of the Nation* is a “burlesque operetta,” which comes as a distinct relief. Its sprightly overture, filled with whistles and trumpet salvos, is a delight. Adam Oxtail is the heavyweight champion boxer, the pride of his nation. He is also a cuckolded husband and dumb as an ox. His wife and her lover run circles around him, despite his suspicions. A strange central interlude has the champion angrily pummeling an unattractive, shy young woman who is posing as his punching dummy (don’t ask). The joke turns out to be that she is in ecstasy; this is the sexiest thing that has ever happened to her. That’s about the level of the humor; the matching music runs the gamut from a drunken Johann Strauss with castanets to a little fugue, all brilliantly scored. A masterpiece it’s not, but it is funny when you’re not wincing for the girl. It really doesn’t matter that everybody sings decently, as the orchestra is the star of the show.

The third opera, *The Secret Kingdom*, is a fairy tale, either an homage to or takeoff on *The Magic Flute*. The weak king bewails his failings as revolutionaries storm the palace. He begs his jester for a solution, but gets only a riddle for an answer. The coloratura queen despises her husband, who gives his crown to the fool. She falls for the captured rebel leader and instructs her three ladies to seduce the jester so she can give the crown to her new man, while the king escapes in the jester’s clothing. The palace scene sways and swings with charming near-dance music. Scene 2 takes place in the woods: to escape the rebel, who wants the crown for his people and is trying to kill her, the queen turns herself into a tree. The king tries to hang himself from one of her limbs. Thus, they are reunited and gain wisdom, as the king solves the jester’s riddle. Comical interludes add further light, sweet music, which turns serious, rich, and gorgeous—à la Richard Strauss in top form—for the denouement. The turnabout is reminiscent

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of Ariadne auf Naxos. Against all odds, this strange potpourri succeeds, being enjoyable, funny, and in the end deeply moving. Therein lies its true homage to Mozart. The singing is nearly as variable as the music. Claudia Barainsky is superb in the high-flying role of the queen, tossing off silly roulades in the palace and shining brilliantly in the woods. At first, Michael Kraus as the king seems weak of voice compared to his stentorian jester, Urban Malmberg; but Krenek is setting us up, both for the passion of the revolutionary's tenor, well realized by Pär Lindskog, and for the eventual growth of the king, when he soars over the jester.

These recordings were made in 1998 and 1999; where have they been? The recorded sound is pleasant but not much more; voices are generally clear but can get muddled in rapid going. The orchestra sounds brightly without overwhelming the singing. The enclosed booklet has everything but illustrations, including a side-by-side three-language libretto. Two out of three ain't bad, so I recommend the set to everyone. ---James H. North, classical.premieremusic.net

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