

Carl Orff – Prometheus (Ferdinand Leitner) [2005]

Written by bluesever

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Disc: 1 1. Scene 1. *To the earth's remotest* 2. Scene 2. *Oh thou bring sky of heaven* 3. Scene 3. *Ha! Hold!* 4. Scene 4. *I am come to the goal of a long journey* 5. Scene 5. *I mourn over thee, Prometheus* Disc: 2 1. Scene 6. *What land is this? What people?* 2. Scene 7. *Ah, sage, sage in sooth* 3. Scene 8. *But stay, for yonder I behold this lackey* 4. Scene 9. *Lo, no it hath passed from word to deed*

Josef Greindl - Power (Kratos) Heinz Cramer – Hephaestus Roland Hermann – Prometheus Kieth Engen – Oceanus Choir of the Oceanides – Edda Moser, Sophia van Sante, Raili Kostia lo – Colette Lorand Hermes – Frit Uhl Women's Chorus of West German Radio Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra Ferdinand Leitner - conductor Recorded Cologne, 1972

Carl Orff's Prometheus completes his trilogy of Greek tragedies, the two earlier works being Oedipus the Tyrant and Antigone. This is the only one actually set in the original Greek (the other two use German translations), and it's good to have this impressive 1972 studio performance back in the catalog, as there isn't likely to be another--nor, frankly, do we need one. The work contains just as much dialog as music, and the latter is stripped to the bone: simple rhythms with lots of metallic percussion, mostly in short bursts. Even the singing, usually some form of syllabic chant, is very minimally accompanied. There's also plenty of action for wind and thunder machines, recreating what Orff took to be the story's primal ambiance. The cast is excellent, led by Roland Hermann's tormented Prometheus. Josef Greindl as Kratos (Power) spits out the words with terrifying force, and as Io, Colette Lorand's shrieks will have your neighbors calling the police.

In short, this really is a piece for confirmed Orffnicks, but that doesn't lessen the impressiveness of Ferdinand Leitner's achievement in committing it to disc. The 1972 sonics have come up well in this transfer, save for a touch of distortion at the loudest climaxes. Arts Music provides an English-only version of the libretto in the accompanying booklet, which is useful since most people can't read Greek--and the only serious competition, Kubelik's equally fine 1975 live set on Orfeo with largely the same cast, isn't so generous. ---David Hurwitz, ClassicsToday.com

Prometheus is by a long measure the most recent of Orff's works in this set and it's equally clearly the most challenging. It sets a text, in Greek, derived from Aeschylus's Prometheus and followed directly from Orff's settings of Antigone and Sophocles' Oedipus. In Prometheus however his means had become increasingly stark, with declamation, not singing, being the means of communicating the text and the supporting instrumentation being largely percussive but augmented by woodwind, ceremonial brass, harps, double-basses and pianos.

Orff's musical focus is here rhythmic, with expressive outbursts emerging from declaimed text with abrasive force. The solo narrative, augmented by choral stretches, is indeed sometimes unaccompanied, or else garnished - if that's the right word - by a battery of percussive interjectory colour. Those who have heard reconstructions of music for the Greek theatre will perhaps recognise in Orff's setting a kind of heightened, almost phantasmagoric extrapolation of the stasis and paragraphal percussive points that animated their theatre.

All this is remarkable but pretty heavy weather. There are certainly unceasing moments of textual illumination, though you'll have a hard job following the text as it's solely in English and there are only a few edit points to guide one. One such is the early and visceral moment when Prometheus is "smitten with hammer" as he's chained to the rock, a moment accompanied with the requisite amount of hammering. The macabre laugh of Power is well characterised – all the singers cope magnificently with their essentially spoken or declaimed parts – and the weird occasional melismas, falsetto ascents (disc 1, track 4 – Scene IV) and snarls that stud the text act as dramatic high points.

Roland Hermann deserves all praise for his fantastic control in the central role and in Scene VI we meet in concentrated form the powerfully stratospheric Colette Lorand. There's luxury casting down the list and a conductor only too well versed in Orff lore. This two-disc set is a very tough nut; it's a product of textual analysis of the most austere kind and all musical devices are subservient to textual meaning. There are no lush orchestral string choirs – forget the ebullience and freedoms of the pre-War Orff. Much of it, to unsympathetic auditors, will seem penitentially awful. But it remains an important work in Orff's oeuvre and a necessary component of this vibrant and still recommendable boxed set. ---Jonathan Woolfm, .musicweb-international.com

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