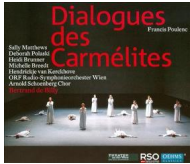


Poulenc - Dialogues des Carmelites (de Billy) [2012]

Written by bluesever

Saturday, 18 June 2011 18:39 - Last Updated Tuesday, 18 March 2014 12:09

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Sally Matthews (Blanche) Yann Beuron (Le Chevalier de la Force) Jean-Philippe Lafont (Le Marquis de la Force) Deborah Polaski (Madame de Croissy) Heidi Brunner (Madame Lidoine) Michelle Breedt (Mère Marie) Hendrickje van Kerckhove (Soeur Constance) Magdalena Anna Hofmann (Mere Jeanne) Christa Ratzenbock (Soeur Mathilde) Arnold Schoenberg Choir Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra Bertrand De Billy – conductor

Bertrand de Billy's live 2011 performance of *Dialogues des Carmélites* at Theater an der Wien is notable for the vigor of his conducting and his dramatic highlighting of the score's contrasts, which have rarely sounded so stark and tension-filled. He doesn't stint on conveying the music's generous lushness, in scenes such as the first, which is characterized by the composer's typically suave Gallic urbanity in its depiction of Blanche's aristocratic family. What comes as a revelation, though, are the outbursts of Stravinskian ruggedness in the orchestration and harmonies that de Billy does nothing to soften, which are especially evident in the orchestral interludes between scenes. His rhythmic control is crisp and precise, and points up the score's evocations of Baroque French opera, but he also gives the music plenty of room to breathe. The ORF Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien delivers the drama of de Billy's vision with urgency and plays the more lyrical sections with limpid, sumptuous tone.

The vocal casting is not consistently persuasive. Sally Matthews' voice is large and her vibrato is more pronounced than that of the rest of the cast, making her Blanche a far-from-typical characterization. The fact that her voice is so powerful in relation to the voices of the other singers makes for an imbalance that's at odds with the premise that Blanche is the opera's most

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timorous and tentative character. In a more vocally distinguished ensemble she could be highly effective because her characterization is intensely personal and deeply felt. Here, though, the other singers simply pale in comparison. The roles of the other nuns are sung without much distinctiveness, except for Hendrickje van Kerckhove's warm, luminous Sister Constance. Yann Beuron is strong and sympathetic as Blanche's brother, Le Chevalier de la Force. The sound is generally full, detailed, and clean, but the theatrical realism of the live performance doesn't compensate for the variability of balance and volume as the singers move around the stage.

The excellent orchestral playing and fine choral singing by the Arnold Schoenberg Chor, and especially de Billy's assured, insightful conducting make this a recording that anyone who loves the opera will want to hear, but it would not make the best introduction for newcomers.

---Stephen Eddins, Rovi

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