



RECORDING OF THE MONTH

The first beauty

Gideon KLEIN (1919-1945)

Divertimento for wind octet (1939) [16:05]

Johan KVANDAL (1919-1999)

Night Music, op.57 (1981) [18:10]

Isang YUN (1917-1995)

Wind Octet with double bass (1993) [19:11]

Magnar ÅM (b.1952)

the first beauty for wind octet with double bass (2012) [21:20]

Oslo Kammerakademi/David Friedemann Strunck

rec. 11-13 October 2013, 28 February–2 March 2014, Grefsen Church, Oslo, Norway

LAWO LWC1093 [75:03]

Recording wind instruments is a bit of a producer's nightmare. The sound comes out all over the place – flutes (if there are any) and horns sideways, oboes and clarinets forwards, and bassoons all over the place. So my first plaudit for this disc goes to the Norwegian production team, headed by Vegard Landaas, who have done a wonderful job. The balance is, to my ears, perfect, and in particular allows the horns to play, when required, with really full tone, without wrecking the ensemble and drowning the others. So often, in wind ensemble music, the horns sound either as if they are in another room, or have been made to play so quietly that their tone is emasculated.

There is some superb music on this disc but beware this is emphatically not easy listening. By the end, though I was utterly engaged by the sheer quality of what I was hearing, and equally impressed with the work of this outstanding ensemble.

The CD opens with the *Divertimento* of Gideon Klein, who was an extravagantly gifted Jewish musician, who died at the age of 25 near the end of World War 2. His story is very moving; before being transported to Auschwitz, he was at Theresienstadt (Terezin) camp, where he was one of the principal moving forces behind the many fine works that were written and performed in those unlikely circumstances. This octet was possibly his last completed composition of any size before he was sent to Theresienstadt, and it is a piece that confirms the outstanding gifts of the then 20-year old composer. His understanding of the possibilities of each instrument, his ear for texture, and above all his ability to create a powerful sense of continuity from one movement to the next – all these are sure signs of a rare talent.

The general mood is sarcastic, even bitter at times; but this is tellingly offset by the beautiful and lyrical *Adagio*, which makes use of a melody by Janáček, a major influence on Klein, along with Hindemith and Berg. The tune, played by the oboe, comes from the cycle *The Diary of One who Disappeared* - intensely poignant, for Klein died, presumed murdered, not long after he reached Auschwitz. Like all the works here, it is given a superb performance by Oslo Kammerakademi. All these instrumentalists are of the highest quality, and it is particularly remarkable that they are directed in this very complex music not by a conductor, but by the ensemble's artistic director, the oboist David Friedmann Strunck, whose playing, even in this company, shines out all the way through the disc.

The Kvandal octet with double bass may not be as striking a piece as the Klein, and is certainly not as radical. It is nonetheless an enjoyable and extremely well written one, with a deliciously perky finale, and, before that a slow movement of real character. This begins with a beautifully played duet for the bassoons, then continues with long melodic lines over an accompaniment like a slow tango. Throughout the piece, Kvandal makes excellent use of his one stringed instrument, the double bass.

Night Music, by Isang Yun is another piece for this highly effective combination of wind octet with double bass. Yun is another composer with an extraordinary story. Born in Korea, he was imprisoned by the Japanese during World War 2. After the war, he began to establish himself as a composer, and settled in Germany. Then in 1967 he was kidnapped by the South Korean secret service, and taken back to Seoul, where he was tried and convicted as a North Korean sympathiser. A world-wide petition, featuring names such as Stravinsky, Ligeti and Karajan, led to his release and return to Germany.

His work is probably the most difficult on the CD for the listener, as it is a single span lasting nineteen minutes, and makes considerable use of microtones, most notably in the oboe parts. It also makes, in its later stages, phenomenal demands on the horn players. They rise to the challenge magnificently.

The final work is the one that gives this disc its title – *the first beauty* by Norwegian composer Magnar Åm. It was commissioned by the Oslo Kammerakademi in 2012. It is in three movements; the first (titled '*which unites my deepest unease*') is thinly scored, with a single instrument from each section weaving a long solo line. It dissolves in a long clarinet cadenza, which gives way to the second movement ('*with my happiest dance*'). This is livelier, but still has a distracted mood, not really 'happy' at all. As it progresses, slow trills begin to emerge in various instruments, a feature which is carried forward, to great effect, into the haunting final movement, '*and lifts me into a timeless understanding*'.

This is a superbly performed and produced programme, which, though challenging, is ultimately impressive and rewarding.

Gwyn Parry-Jones