

Marianne Beate Kielland: “Whispering Mozart”

CD Mortensen, piano. Texts and translations. LAWO Classics CD LWC 1111



THIS SPLENDID RECITAL proves how much Mozart accomplished in the lied form—and on its behalf. Norwegian mezzo-soprano Marianne Beate Kielland, with marvelous support from pianist Nils Anders Mortensen, proves the ideal guide to an ancillary corner of the Mozart canon and its surprises.

A bright-toned lyric mezzo, Kielland is probably best known for Baroque repertoire. (Her “Erbarne Dich” from the St. Matthew Passion, with early instruments, is not to be missed.) And she seems to approach Mozart with attributes of Baroque style—not busy embellishment, which wouldn’t be suitable, but instead quickness and intensity, strong momentum, variety of phrasing and especially vivid rubato. You can hear these tracks repeatedly, just to savor an individual factor like her diction, which is so crunchy yet often subtle. The only period-performance trait that seems especially emphatic, possibly over-habitual although nearly always justified, is her bending of

notes for emotional force, a combination of darkened tone and slightly flattened pitch.

So the title “Whispering Mozart” could hardly be less suitable for this disc or this singer. Just try “Eine kleine deutsche Kantata” (composed in Mozart’s final year), one of the longest and most dramatic items on the program, and admittedly not exactly a song. The solo cantata’s assertive opening recitative, with fiery, Baroque-style, dotted-rhythm accompaniment, finds the singer declaiming on an operatic scale, trumpeting climactic high notes. The contrasting tempos of the succeeding sections nearly disguise a sermonlike text about mutual forbearance and brotherhood; everything feels immediate, personal and emotional thanks to Kielland’s quicksilver shifts and resounding tone.

And while her pastel-shaded soft singing illuminates the lengthy, familiar “Abendempfindung,” a song that has a foretaste of Schubert, here too the palette is far too rich for the “whispering” label. Even the ditties that maintain uniform stanza structure in a kind of lockstep, such as the opening selection, “Das Traumbild,” have strong pulse and unexpected variety.

In a song that becomes a compelling dramatic scene in under two minutes, “Als Luise die Briefe ihres ungetreuen Liebhabers verbrannte” (Luise Burns the Letters from Her Faithless Suitor), Mozart starkly portrays the character’s bitter memories and her slow-burning ironic reflections. Kielland is alert to the contrasts in this splendidly free musical form that breaks the strophic mold.

In other hands, these German texts could easily become cloying, especially in their fixed menu of loss, wistful disappointment and then consolation, their bromides revealed in the titles themselves: “To Friendship,” “To Joy,” “Satisfaction,” “To Loneliness,” “To Modesty.” These performers manage to suggest a sincerity and emotional readiness that keep these tunes sounding fresh.

In one case, “Ich wurd’ auf meinem Pfad” (Often on My Path), one of three complaints-with-consolation by theologian and author Johann Timotheus Hermes (1738–1821), we’re treated to an especially adventurous Mozart work. While the text finds solace for pain and grief, the music’s unrelenting minor key, stormy irruptions and trailing cadences insist on a darker, unrelieved worldview. The voice and piano embrace the contradictions, keeping them especially tense and, paradoxically, rewarding. —David J. Baker

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