

Fêtes Galantes

DEBUSSY: Chansons de Bilitis; *Fêtes Galantes* I; Mallarmé Poems; **FAURE:** 5 Melodies de Venise; Chanson d'Eve
Bettina Smith, mz; Einar Rottingen, p
LAWO 1116—55 minutes

Here are five complete song sets by two of the greatest masters of French song. The performers are highly competent. I should have known, given the rave review that Erin Heisel wrote of their recording of modern Norwegian songs (S/O 2015).

Bettina Smith (who is, like her pianist, a Norwegian) handles the French texts very well. Still, I noticed some approximate pronunciations. Her vibrato is mostly under good control, but the brief passages of coloratura in Fauré's 'Clair de Lune' are not tossed off with ease. Her mezzo-soprano voice broadens wonderfully

at the top, especially at high volumes.

At the bottom it is often a bit light. Is she singing these songs in keys that are a little low for her (which thus helps the top notes be well in her grasp)?

On an interpretive level, the singer is often emotionally neutral. There are few shadings to indicate regret, humor, passion. The singer responds to the text mainly by becoming louder or softer, or by speeding up or slowing down a little. The touching conclusion of 'C'est l'Extase'—

Tout bas" (soft and low)—here becomes merely two more words for Smith to sing in her nice, solid fashion. Her pianist shows high skill but, at least in this repertoire, little independent imagination.

This shortcoming is most apparent in the least known set: a true cycle by Fauré that amounts to a kind of mini-opera for Eve, the world's first woman. I cannot help but wonder if Smith (or, indeed, Rottingen) has thought about the many fascinating aspects of the ten poems that Fauré selected out of a much longer collection by Charles van Lerberghe. For one thing, Eve, in Fauré's cycle, has a fascinating relationship with what seems to be the primary more-or-less-male figure in her life:

God, about whom the world's first woman sings in an intimate, even sensual manner. There are numerous recordings of these works; some supply more variety in the emission of the voice and greater attention to the subtleties of the poetry. Recordings of the Eve cycle by Elly Ameling, Jan De Gaetani, Barbara Hendricks, and Nathalie Stutzmann (who is a native French-speaker) are listed in our index, mostly under the composer and then the simple word "Songs". Not in the index are recordings by Irma Kolassi and Dawn Upshaw. The latter is pure and gripping, with superb support from pianist Gilbert Kalish. The pioneering and highly responsive recording by Phyllis Curtin and Ryan Edwards (1964)—likewise not in the index—is still available on VAI 1186. The booklet essay alternates trenchant observations and hyperbolic generalizations. Full texts and translations.

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