



24 Nov 2017

## Bettina Smith, Norwegian Mezzo, in Songs by Fauré and Debussy

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 reviews that their 2015 recording of modern Norwegian songs received.

**Fêtes Galantes: Songs by Debussy and Fauré**

Bettina Smith, mezzo-soprano; Einar Røttingen, piano.

Lawo LWC1116 [CD]

Impressive that Bettina Smith (who is, like her pianist, a Norwegian) handles the French texts so well. Still, I noticed some approximate pronunciations: she often forgets to pronounce certain s's as z's, the soft g can come a sh, and ou (i.e., oo) sometimes turns into o. Smith's 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 within her grasp)?

On a more interpretive level, the singer is often emotionally neutral. There are few shadings to indicate specific tones of voice: regret, humor, passion. The singer responds to the text mainly by becoming louder or softer, or by speeding up or slowing down a little, and this is done at the level of entire long phrases and sentences, rarely individual words. 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 well-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, Røttingen) 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 an intriguing 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 (e.g., songs 4 and 7). [Smith and Rottingen's straightforward approach—and their high competence on a purely musico-technical level, which I do not mean in any way to disparage—can be heard on YouTube in the minute-long song 3 of the cycle, "Roses ardentes."](#)

There are numerous recordings of these works that I know, or suspect, provide more variety in the emission of the voice and greater attention to the subtleties of the poetry. I have either read high praise of, or have sampled with pleasure on YouTube, recordings of the Eve cycle by Elly Ameling, Jan De Gaetani, Barbara Hendricks, Irma Kolassi, Nathalie Stutzmann (who is a native French-speaker), and Dawn Upshaw. [Upshaw is pure and gripping, with superb support from pianist Gilbert Kalish.](#) The pioneering and highly responsive recording by Phyllis Curtin and Ryan Edwards (1964) is still available on VAI 1186, and [the long first song from the Curtin/Edwards recording is on YouTube, revealing the great soprano's admirable combination of warmth and control.](#)

The booklet-essay for the present CD alternates trenchant observations and hyperbolic generalizations. I was delighted to find full texts and translations, from Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes's first-rate *[A French Song Companion](#)*.

***Ralph P. Locke***

The above review is a lightly revised version of one that first appeared in *American Record Guide* and appears here by kind permission.

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