

## **Rikard NORDRAAK (1842 – 1866)**

### **Songs and Piano Music**

Helene Wold (soprano)

Eugene Asti (piano), Vegard Lund (guitar: tr. 25)

rec. Sofienberg Church, Oslo, 2015

Sung texts with English translations enclosed

**LAWO LWC1119** [66:30]

Rikard Nordraak may well be a completely unknown name to non-Norwegian music lovers and probably also to many Norwegians. But I bet that most Norwegians – and a lot of people in the Nordic neighbouring countries – know one piece of music by him, and can sing it as well. That is the Norwegian national anthem! The music was composed in 1864 to a text written five years earlier by his first cousin, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, the famous author and Nobel Prize Winner. To readers more knowledgeable in Nordic music the name may also ring a bell that was an important inspiration to the young Edvard Grieg, who was one year his junior. Nordraak had a deep interest in Norwegian folk music and that interest was transmitted to Grieg. But Nordraak died very young, not yet 24 years of age, and his posthumous works are rather few: some piano pieces, mostly miniatures, a number of songs and some incidental music. His only major composition is the *Scherzo Capriccio* (tr. 12) for piano with a playing-time of about eight minutes. The folk music inspiration is very evident, there are traces of the traditional dance *slåtter* and the dissonances are reminiscent of the *hardingfele*, where the sympathetic strings, or understrings, resonate under influence from the four that are played with the bow.

The elegant and melodically attractive *Valse Caprice* that opens this programme, was used as incidental music for Bjørnson's drama *Maria Stuart of Scotland*, where also *Spansk sang* (Spanish Song), the number that concludes this disc, was employed. It is sung here with guitar accompaniment, which it probably was also in the play.

There is a good handful of other piano pieces included here, all of them attractive. *Venskabs-polka* (tr. 3) is light and spirited, *Melodi* (tr. 5) is a beautiful meditation, *Allegro* (tr. 11) has a lively opening and a slower minor-key mid-section, *Taarnvaegteren* (tr. 13) is short but distinct and *Troubadur-vals* (tr. 24) is a real charmer. Included are also *Fire dandse for piano* (tr. 20 – 23), which Nordraak published while he was still a teen-ager and later wouldn't acknowledge. They are charming pieces even so, and the most accomplished is the rather extended *Nora-varsoviana*. Eugene Asti plays all the pieces with sensitive phrasing without trying to over-interpret what is mostly rather unassuming music.

He is also an excellent accompanist, and it is in that capacity he is best known, not least through a large number of recordings with prominent vocal artists. Soprano Helene Wold, who also contributes personal and penetrating liner notes on Nordraak, has a beautiful voice and sings with strong feeling for the texts. The majority of the songs (ten out of fourteen) are settings of Bjørnson's poetry and one gets the impression that those texts triggered Nordraak's inspiration extra strongly. *Aftenstemning* (Evening Mood) has a certain folk tone, while the simple and beautiful *Wenn sich zwei Herzen scheiden* (When'er Two Hearts Have Parted) to a text by Emanuel Geibel, the only song in another language than Norwegian, rather is influenced by Schubert.

The five songs Op. 2, dedicated to Magdalene Thoresen, have a clear Norwegian hue, maybe most obvious in the interludes, least so in *Solvejgje*, which also is the one text not by Bjørnson. The four Bjørnson are all from his novel *Arne*, issued in 1859 and, interestingly enough, dedicated to Ole Bull, the great Norwegian violinist and composer. The first of the six songs Op. 1, *Jeg har søgt*, is a setting of a poem by the dedicatee of the Op. 1 songs, the Danish-Norwegian author and playwright Magdalene Thoresen. She was a central figure in the cultural circle of Bergen, which included Bjørnson, Bull and also Nordraak, her stepdaughter was married to Henrik Ibsen and her personality became a model for several characters in Norwegian literature, including Bjørnson's *Maria Stuart*. Several of these songs are also Norwegian in tone. If I would single out one of these songs as representative for Nordraak and worthy a place on the Norwegian Song Top Twenty List, by the side of Grieg, Backer-Grøndahl, Sinding and Tveitt it would be the *Romance "Ingrid Sletten"* (tr. 15) – again a setting of Bjørnson from the novel *Arne*. But everything here is worth hearing, not least as a memento of a great talent who was bereft the possibility to develop into a mature master due to his untimely death.

### **Göran Forsling**

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