

FAURE: Songs

Bettina Smith, mz; Jan Willem Nelleke, p
Lawo 1146—49 minutes

Norwegian Mezzo-soprano Bettina Smith's supple tone and liquescent phrasing make her an ideal interpreter of the songs of Fauré. The excellent Dutch pianist Jan Willem Nelleke brings an exquisite touch to this album as well. Even connoisseurs of the great French composer will find surprises here; the superb interpretive powers of the two performers reveal new nuances in this music. Smith sings with remarkable control, and her vibrato is evenly spun, lending softness to her tone and never impeding her clarity of pitch. She brings to this repertoire a fine balance of fervor and restraint. Nelleke approaches these songs with a cool and precise touch, revealing Fauré the modernist rather than the romantic. The overall

effect is one of stunning immediacy.

The mini song cycle *Poème d'un Jour* is based on poems by Charles Grandmougin.

This three-song set finds Fauré at his most direct. The central song, 'Toujours', is a fiery *cri de coeur* and contains one of Fauré's rare outbursts

of sheer passion. This is followed by the exquisite 'Adieu', a tender, introspective song, eloquently performed.

The most substantial set here is *La Bonne Chanson*, nine songs on poems by Paul Verlaine.

It was composed in the summers of 1892 and 1893 while Fauré was staying with the soprano Emma Bardac and her banker husband

in the suburbs of Paris. The cycle is dedicated to Emma, whom Fauré was apparently in love with, and who would later become Debussy's second wife. Fauré's infatuation

with the soprano inspired some of the most daring harmonic inventions of his career, prompting his former teacher Saint-Saëns to declare, "Fauré has gone completely mad!" Some listeners may agree with Debussy's assessment of this song cycle as "needlessly complicated"; still, it gives the performers an opportunity to display their technical prowess

and is an effective contrast to the more conventional songs here.

Two late cycles round out the program: *Mirages* (1919), and *L'Horizon Chimerique* (1921), the last of Fauré's vocal works. The 1919 cycle is notable for its spare texture and introspective mood—such a marked departure

from the adventurous spirit of the composer's middle period. The final set, the title of which translates roughly to "The Imaginary Horizon", employs imagery of the sea in poignant metaphors on memory, loss, and regret.

Delicately

sung by Smith, these final songs both communicate and inspire the intense yearning that is such a hallmark of Fauré's music.

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