

Contemporary

Abrahamsen

let me tell you

Barbara Hannigan sop Bavarian Radio

Symphony Orchestra / Andris Nelsons

Winter & Winter © 910 232-2; © 917 232-1
(33' • DDD • T)



Hans Abrahamsen and Paul Griffiths's *let me tell you*, winner of both a Grawemeyer and an

RPS award, is inspired by *Hamlet*'s Ophelia and it is a richly theatrical journey. Yet that is not because it attempts to depict Shakespeare's heroine as she is traditionally understood. Instead Griffiths distilled his text for these seven interlinked songs from his novel of the same name, which (almost literally) rebuilt Ophelia as a narrator using only the words Shakespeare gave her, reordered and repeated as Griffiths saw fit.

As this filtration process is itself worked through Abrahamsen's half-hour score, however, the idea has undergone another transformation. The spare yet pregnant lines of text meet Abrahamsen's finely spun textures and each word feels felt and weighed in music. Possibly you don't even need to know that Barbara Hannigan is singing Ophelia's words any more, yet her vehemence and passion suggest she thinks justice is finally being done to a woman who never did get much chance to tell her side of the story. Hannigan premiered the piece in 2013 (then it was performed by the Berlin Philharmonic under Andris Nelsons; now the Latvian has recorded it with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra) and had reportedly coached the composer on the intricacies of vocal music for what was his first sung work. One imagines these sessions produced the use of *stile concitato* emphases on repeated syllables, a flick of Monteverdi added to a more usual Hannigan repertoire of jarring leaps and plunges across her formidable range.

Alongside this, the Danish composer's sound world is a mass of glinting detail. There are prominent parts for glockenspiel (struck and bowed), celesta and vibraphone, and ear-tickling swerves between microtonal clusters and more recognisable Romantic echoes. To the line 'A robin will tune his bells', in the vast fifth song, there is a

ravishing blur of downward lines, and if it does sound like (rather psychedelic) ringing, by the time the verse reaches its end – 'glass in which there are showers of light' – the music cracks into a myriad of colours, as if refracted from a broken shard.

The Bard's Ophelia drowned in the brook; this one wanders into the snow, her tread hypnotically evoked by paper softly rubbed around the skin of a bass drum. It's a tiny, tragic *Winterreise*, but its final sung echoes are defiant: 'I will go on'. The rest is silence.

Neil Fisher

J Anderson

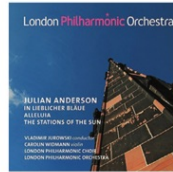
In lieblicher Bläue^a. Alleluia^b. The Stations of the Sun^c ^aCarolyn Widmann *vn* London Philharmonic

^bChoir and Orchestra / Vladimir Jurowski

LPO © LPO0089 (54' • DDD • T/I)

Recorded live at the Royal Festival Hall, London,

^cDecember 7, 2013. ^bMarch 1, 2014. ^aMarch 14, 2015



This is the fourth disc to be devoted exclusively to the music of Julian Anderson and

the second such venture on the LPO's own label, reflecting his stint as Composer in Residence with the orchestra, 2010-14. Intriguing as it is, I'm not sure newcomers would be best advised to start with *In lieblicher Bläue* (2014-15), which contains some spatial and symbolic elements not readily perceptible in audio format. Carolyn Widmann's physical location and posture change throughout. At one point a vaguely Schnittke-like gesture requires the soloist to lay down the bow and play using a pencil. While the composer's lucid explanatory note survives inept editing, those familiar with Friedrich Hölderlin's late prose-poem may have a head start in appreciating music at once lyrical and beautifully voiced but elusive by design in its troubled search for identity.

There is more concerto-like display in the companion pieces. The joyous *Alleluia*, commissioned for the reopening of the Royal Festival Hall following its refurbishment in 2007, was originally programmed as an up-beat to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and makes memorable and idiomatic use of the London Philharmonic Choir, with whom the composer himself has sung. The writing is characteristic in its insistent mix of

glitter and grit, new (American) colours added to an eclectic pick of the 20th-century bran tub. Homegrown influences are more strongly felt in *The Stations of the Sun* (1998), a 'carillonading and tumultuous' yet emotionally engaging Proms commission of which composer-conductor Oliver Knussen made the first studio recording some years ago. The two share a fondness for skirling woodwind and meaningful harmonic movement. If Vladimir Jurowski's punchy performances were indeed captured live with only minimal patching, they are all three remarkably accomplished. Applause has been expunged and the sound is good too.

David Gutman

Birtwistle

Birtwistle Angel Fighter^a. In Broken Images.

Virelai (Sus une fontayne)

^aAndrew Watts *countertenor* ^aJeffrey Lloyd-

Roberts *ten* ^aBBC Singers; London Sinfonietta /

David Atherton NMC © NMC211 (54' • DDD • T)



As co-founder of the London Sinfonietta in 1968, David Atherton has been responsible

for several Birtwistle premieres down the decades: his first was the English Opera Group production of *Punch and Judy*, just as the Sinfonietta was being set up. Now, more than 40 years on, they and Atherton return with a group of recent Birtwistle scores; and anyone in 2015 disposed to expect ageing dinosaurs going through the motions should be struck by the energy and sharpness of response in these recordings.

Sharpness – remaining consistent without falling back into cliché – is also what Birtwistle's music is about. The poem by Robert Graves that lies behind *In Broken Images* refers disarmingly to 'a new understanding of my confusion' as a result of becoming 'sharp, mistrusting my broken images', and Birtwistle's music today is just as lacking in complacency as it was in 1968. *Angel Fighter* starts with the advantage of a pithy text by Stephen Plaice, librettist of *The Io Passion*, and this 'dramatic episode from Genesis' depicts the brutal confrontation between a human sinner, Jacob (tenor), and an implacably euphonious angel (countertenor). The moral, for a secular