

Sarah Maria Sun Dazzles in Modern Recital

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MODERN LIED / HOLLIGER: 6 Lieder nach Gedichten von Christian Morgenstern. **SCIARRINO:** Due Melodie. **LACHENMANN:** Got Lost. **KURTÁG:** Requiem do Drugu, Op. 26. **RIHM:** Ophelia Sings. **LANG:** Wenn die Landschaft Aufhört / Sarah Maria Sun, soprano; Jan Philip Schulze, pianist / Mode 297

Soprano Sarah Maria Sun, if you just go by the “biography” in the CD booklet, appeared out of nowhere to sing music of the 16th through 21st centuries. She has performed, booked by magic, at major venues around Europe and sung with such luminaries as Simon Rattle, Kent Nagano and Heinz Holliger. She was first soprano of the Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart from 2001 to 2014 and has given master classes for modern vocal music at Harvard, Oslo, Stockholm, Zürich, Moscow, Hannover, Berlin and Chicago Universities. You need to go to her own website to learn that she has been singing since the age of 10, first studied voice at Cologne and Stuttgart before taking lessons from Darinka Segota and Tanja Ariane

Universities. You need to go to her own website to learn that she has been singing since the age of 10, first studied voice at Cologne and Stuttgart before taking lessons from Darinka Segota and Tanja Ariane Baumgartner. But that is all you will find. No year of birth. She apparently didn't have parents or other relatives to support her in her career. No "angels" to help pay for her education, and she just popped, as if out of a toaster, to sing modern music.

This is not do much an indictment against Ms. Sun as it is an indictment against the whole professional concept of a "biography." A few "look what I did" facts and details do not a biography make. Does she ever sing characters in operas, or just concert music? How did she become so deeply involved in modern music to begin with? Who were her own favorite singers, how much training did her voice need to reach this point, and who "made" her career? Enquiring minds want to know...like mine!

Listening to the CD, one is presented with a well-controlled, light, high soprano voice with tremendous brilliance or *squillo* in it. Perhaps a bit too much *squillo*, as her extreme high range has just a touch of acid about it—not bad, but noticeable. The mid-range is lovely, however, and she surprisingly can do down the scale when she needs to.

As for the music, it is both varied and interesting. Heinz Holliger's *Six Songs after Poems by Christian Morgenstern* can best be described as typical German-Austrian modern music, atonal but still lyrical like some of the Berg songs. I was delighted by both the text settings and Sun's singing of them; she has near-perfect diction, always a bugaboo for me with modern-day singers. By contrast, Salvatore Sciarrino's *Due Melodie* are completely atonal to the point where the listener has no guideposts except, perhaps, through the sustained tones given to the vocalist. Sun describes his style as using the voice "as a magnet, drawing us into the inner life of a...text. He achieves this by using the singing voice, with sometimes furious and difficult coloratura-ornaments; the speaking voice, breathing sounds; and various nouth-noises." These specific songs center around almost continuous use of trills, and happily Sun has a very clean and clear one.

In contrast to both of these, Helmut Lachenmann's *Got Lost* is essentially a technical exercise for the voice with very few lyrics. Like Cathy Berberian's former husband and muse, Luciano Berio, Lachenmann exploits its use as an instrument. In an interview with Sun printed in the booklet, Lachenmann questions the very use of poetry as song texts, finding them objectionable and even "unbearable." Both soprano and pianist are thus flung by Lachenmann into the ether, throwing sounds around like notated Frisbees, only occasionally coming back to earth to be grounded in a single note (but not a tonality) for a moment or two before going off again on another tangent. Lachenmann is fond of "the most extreme moments of Berg in which "Messages conveying existential threats were communicated 'without pitch' and certainly not sung." So listener, be forewarned; this is what you'll hear in his music! The brief text is excised from the work of three writers. First up is Friedrich Nietzsche: "No more path! Abyss and silence chilling!...Your fault! To leave the path thou wast too willing!" Then a text by Fernando Pessoa, "All love letters are ridiculous. They wouldn't be love letters if they weren't ridiculous." Finally, an anonymous sign in an elevator in Berlin-Grunewald, 2001/02: "Today my laundry basket got lost. It was last seen standing near the dryer. Since it is pretty difficult to carry the laundry without, I'd be most happy to get it back." Of course, the existential angst comes from the fact that we don't know if this person ever *did* get their laundry basket back. Imagine the suffering if they did not!

Next stop on this wild musical road trip, György Kurtág and his *Songs of Loss* based on the work of Russian poet Rimma Dalos. "Everything here is chromatic," say the notes, and indeed it is. Interestingly, I couldn't tell much difference between the music of Lachenmann and Kurtág. Both are interesting, mind you, but I didn't find their music particularly individual.

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At least Wolfgang Rihm's *Ophelia Sings* has a discernible rhythm, if no less a definable melodic line. In fact, the second song here, "Tomorrow is St. Valentine's day, All in the morning betime," is downright lyrical in its first four lines before breaking up into little shards of notes. I noted that Sun's English is not as clearly sung as her German, but heavily accented which causes some problems in understanding the lyrics.

By contrast, Bernhard Lang's *When the Landscape Ceases* is a sort of minimalist piece, using repeated melodic-rhythmic cells in sort of a cockeyed Carl Orff manner. One point I noted was that Sun's voice, though extensive in range, is not differentiated in color and shows no expression whatsoever. Perhaps the composers whose work is being sung here asked for none, but personally I miss crazy Cathy Berberian and her way of getting involved in everything she sang. Yes, that's a personal preference and not an objective judgment, but it's how I feel.

Nonetheless, Sun's CD is dazzling as an exhibition of a superbly trained voice performing modern music, and is thus recommended on that basis.

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