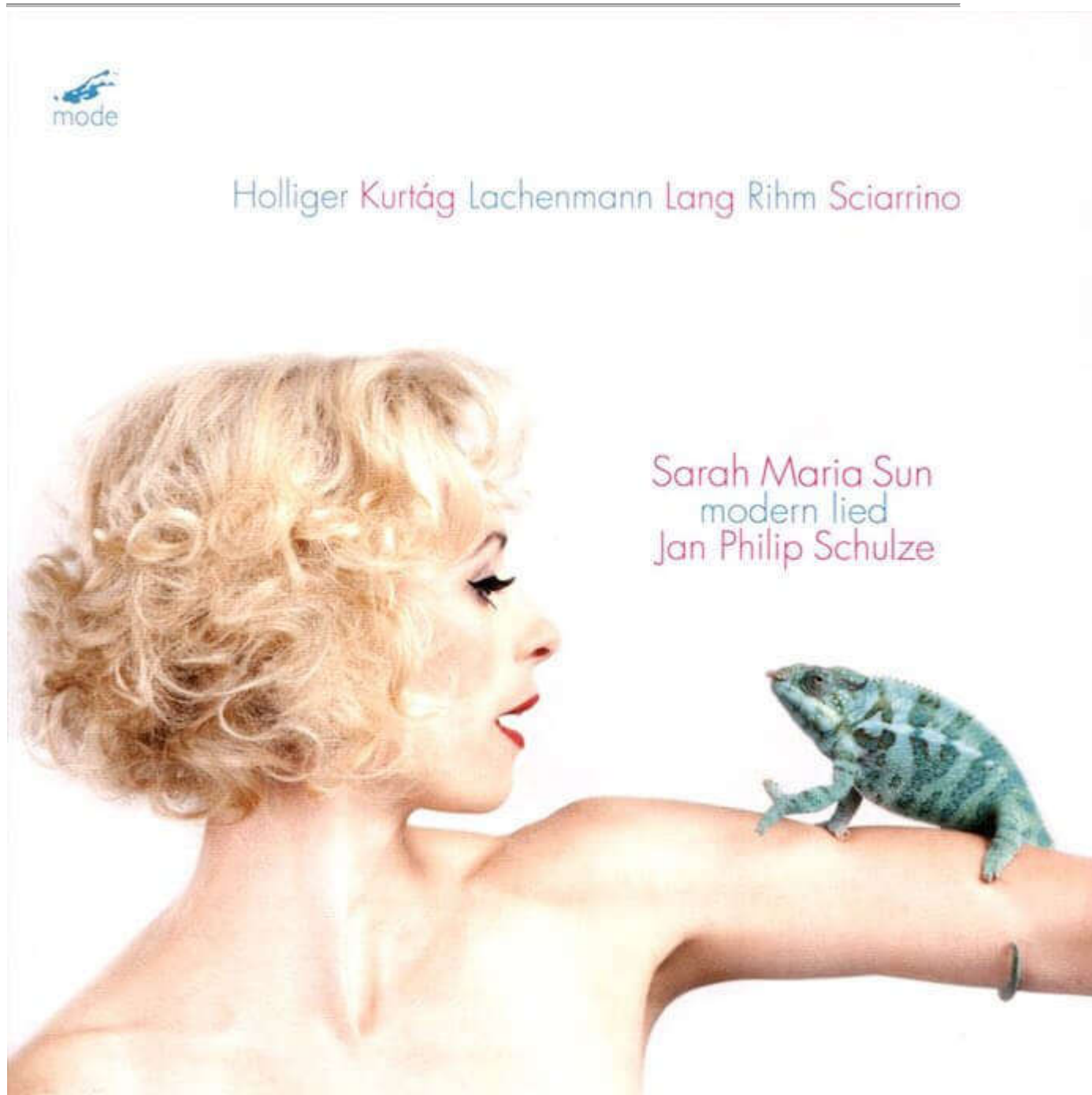


I CARE IF YOU LISTEN



Sarah Maria Sun's Exquisite Modern Lied (Mode Records)

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on September 28, 2017 at 6:00 am

[Sarah Maria Sun](#) & [Jan Philip Schulze](#)'s album *modern lied* opens with one of the things that is most special about Sun's voice; that stratospheric, angelic sigh. Whether swooping up to great heights, as in Salvatore Sciarrino's *Due Melodie* (1978), or dipping low into eerie depths, as in Helmut Lachenmann's *Got Lost* (2007/08), Sun explores the full extents of her range throughout every moment of this recording from Mode Records. Each work featured on this recording is a different example of contemporary art song for voice and piano. While the liner notes gleefully highlight Schulze's prophetic suggestion—"Our next program should be harder. It should be the hardest program ever. We should put some of the greatest contemporary masterpieces of Lied in one program. It should be just insanely beautiful and hard and most of all insanely good. No old stuff included."—what's most impressive is that they went and did it. The repertoire on this recording is ferociously challenging and insanely beautiful. Sun and Schulze make one believe in mastery when listening to this recording.

The technical mastery is on clear auditory display. However, the musical mastery involved in each piece keeps surreptitiously drawing the ear into further communion with this particular recording. Sun and Schulze demonstrate a keen ability to fashion entirely different sound worlds or atmospheres for each composer featured. Both Sciarrino's *Due Melodie* and Lachenmann's *Got Lost* have other-worldly qualities. Where the Sciarrino is ethereal and shimmering, the beginning of the Lachenmann is darker, more chilling—as though there is danger around every corner. Sun doesn't float some of her high notes the way that other new music devoted sopranos do. There's a steeliness and edge to the way she executes those held pitches in the works by Holliger, Rihm, and Lachenmann that is quite special. Another remarkable aspect of this performance is the attention paid to the execution of the many languages. Sun switches from German to English to Spanish to Russian thoughtfully and with great care. Great singers know that there is music not only in the vocal tone but in their way with words as well.



Sarah Maria Sun—Photo by Rüdiger Schestag

A further note, *Got Lost* is a feat of vocal endurance and ability, and Sun absolutely stuns with this piece. Her ability to make all of the sounds, traditional and extended techniques alike, seem to roll from the same spool is remarkable. There are instances of playing with audible breath sounds, tongue clicks, whistling, and more. A momentary tongue trill into a fully resonant sound on a descending vocal line was particularly gorgeous. The way she phrases all of the vocal sounds is what sets apart a good and faithful performance of this piece from her exceptional one. On the subject of *Got Lost*, Lachenmann is quoted, “I always try to create a ‘new instrument’ when I write for a particular group... The voice and piano together form a unique new instrument: an imaginary instrument.” Sun and Schulze demonstrate their collaborative “imaginary instrument” throughout the recording. There is grace in their artistic connection.

From Heinz Holliger’s *Sechs Lieder nach Gedichten von Christian Morgenstern* (1956/57) to Wolfgang Rihm’s *Ophelia Sings* (2012), there are many fantastic instances of this refined exchange between the two performers. In the fourth Holliger, “Vöglein Schwermut (The melancholy little bird),” Schulze provides a fascinating contrast even between two hands. The left hand revels in heaviness while the right hand travels, spritely, to the top of the keyboard to perhaps be the bird song as mentioned in the title. In the album notes, Holliger points out his “flirtation with twelve-tone technique” in the fifth piece of the cycle and reveals that the G minor of the sixth and final song is a dedication to the G minor from Alban Berg’s *Violin Concerto*. In fact, there is a passage in that sixth Holliger that might make Richard Strauss weep. While there are so many examples of wild and dramatic playing, a moment of unison pitch toward the end of *Ophelia Sings* cuts through all of the drama and strikes one like an

arrow to the heart. It is also appropriate to note recording engineer Klemens Kamp's work in achieving the clarity inherent in this album. It doesn't sound like they're in an unsympathetic space; but rather, it is so balanced as to let each of the little nuances in their work shine through.



Jan Philip Schulze

Moving from Rihm to the final piece, Bernhard Lang's *Wenn di Landschaft aufhört*, takes the listener from a robust sound world in both the voice and the piano to a focus on text and its application to a looping rhythmic motive. Lang took inspiration from the video loops of Raffael Montanez Ortiz to feature the voice solely in speaking range—what Lang refers to as pulsing *sprechgesang* or “rapitative.” It's a fascinating change away from expansive range to tight focus on a text moving along at great speed.

Very rarely does one experience a program, inspired by the phrase, “it should be the hardest program ever,” actually turn out to be so remarkably beautiful as is captured in this album. Sun and Schulze were able to avoid being seduced solely by the challenge of the repertoire—they scaled the mountain and remembered to stand in the sun at the top. Luckily, they bring their listeners with them on this *modern lied* recording.