

CDs

Bel Canto Wagner

Niall Hoskin enjoys the CD debut of the soprano Jenufa Gleich

Wagner: *Träume*. 'Weh' mir, so nah' die fürchterliche Stunde' (*Die Feen*); 'Allmächt'ge Jungfrau!', 'Dich, teure Halle' (*Tannhäuser*); 'Traft ihr, das Schiff' (*Der fliegende Holländer*); 'Ewig war ich, ewig bin ich' (*Siegfried*); Wesendonck Lieder. Jenufa Gleich (soprano); BBC National Orchestra of Wales/Fabrice Bollon. Stone Records 5060192781038 (59 minutes)

This is the first operatic recording from Stone Records, an independent label run by the British singer Mark Stone. It's also the debut on CD of Jenufa Gleich: her programme echoes that of Birgit Nilsson's 1971 LP with Colin Davis and the London Symphony Orchestra. By that stage the Swedish powerhouse was established at the top of the profession and of her career; Gleich on the other hand has only recently come to Wagner: she sang Helmwig, Freia and the Third Norn at Longborough under Anthony Negus, and recorded the last-named role in Jaap van Zweden's Hong Kong Philharmonic concert *Götterdämmerung*. Here she collaborates with the French conductor Fabrice Bollon, musical director of the Freiburg Opera. He has considerable operatic and symphonic experience and accompanies sympathetically, drawing fine playing from the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Where the orchestra is given its head in the extended opening of Act II of *Tannhäuser*, we hear crisp unanimity in the strings and a lovely oboe solo, and throughout there is fine playing from all sections. The recorded sound, clear and warm, not too reverberant, is of the high quality one expects from the producer Phil Rowlands.

Gleich was born of émigré parents in Brooklyn; she studied in New York, mostly with the redoubtable Maria Caruso Farnworth. Many of her roles have been in the bel canto realm; since moving to Italy, she has paradoxically migrated to the Germanic repertoire. Gleich had an avowed agenda in this recording project: to explore and il-



The American soprano Jenufa Gleich, making her CD debut. Photo Dario Acosta

illustrate the influence of bel canto style on Wagner. Readers may recall the composer's admiration for Bellini's *Norma*: he extolled its virtues to the theatregoers of Riga and even wrote an insertion aria for his performances of it there.

Gleich brings to this repertoire an appealing voice, clear and unmannered, well-focused over two octaves, but not heroic in scale. Her diction is exemplary, abetted by what seems to be quite close microphone placement. Most of her German sounds idiomatic, though I wish the language coach Thomas Schmieger had ensured a more authentic 'e' sound at the start of 'Weh' mir' and 'Ewig war ich'. I must applaud the notion of Schmieger's involvement, however: many recordings and live performances would benefit from a visit from the pronunciation police.

The benefits of the Italianate approach are most evident in the first (and longest) track, Ada's scena 'Weh' mir, so nah' die fürchterliche Stunde' from *Die Feen*. Singer and conductor navigate the changes of mood and tempo most effectively: after the tone of desperation at the start, Gleich produces a delightfully poised *piano* against pizzicato strings and dotted wind figuration at 'es huldigt mir die Feenwelt'. Christopher Winkle, who contributes useful notes on 'Wagner's Singing Style' as exemplified in each piece, describes the final *Allegro molto e con fuoco* as having 'something of the virtuosity of an Italian cabaletta'. (It is also surely indebted to the final section of Agathe's Act II aria in *Der Freischütz*.) Gleich negotiates its athletic contours impressively at Bollon's crackling pace. It's only a shame that Wagner's performance directions such as 'mit großer Wehmut' (with great melancholy) and 'mit erstickter Stimme' (with stifled voice) elicit scant response. The bel canto aesthetic relies for expressiveness on legato and beauty of line, but Wagner increasingly required more specific use of vocal colour.

Elisabeth's two arias from *Tannhäuser* suit Gleich's voice and her approach well: she produces a warm, rich sound for 'Allmächt'ge Jungfrau!', as befits the prayerful tone and the darker colours of the accompanying wind and brass. Good though it is to hear the bass clarinet's eloquent line here, it seems to me to be too far forward. Bollon's tempo is deliberate, causing the singer to break the phrase 'als würd'ge Magd dir nahen kann'. 'Dich, teure Halle', however, is a total success. (It's a gift for the right kind of soprano to sing – why else does it crop up so often in recitals and auditions?) Here the enthusiasm in the outer sections is effectively balanced by the regret expressed in the more lightly scored central passage. The voice soars over even the busiest of the string writing.

By its strophic and diegetic nature, Senta's Ballad is a conventional moment in *Der fliegende Holländer*, and here it comes across as rather pedestrian. Bollon goes for measured tempi again, and Gleich seems to be working hard, often breathing mid-phrase. The vocal delivery is short on light and shade, save for an expressive diminuendo for 'noch nie ein treues Weib er fand'. The coda is doubtless the most heavily scored moment of the disc, and the voice is somewhat overpowered.

If the Ballad is not representative of the role of Senta and its vocal demands – one thinks of the marathon duet with the Dutchman – then 'Ewig war ich' is hardly a typical moment for Brünnhilde; but it fits with Gleich's quest for more lyrical moments. She responds to the serene atmosphere with an appropriately tender vocal sound, but as the texture fills out beyond the initial string writing and becomes agitated at 'rührest zur Woge das Wasser du auf' the voice is well-nigh swamped. It's strange that

Gleich does not sing the trill – surely an essential weapon in the bel canto armoury – on ‘froh und heiter ein Held!’.

Gleich seems altogether more comfortable with the Wesendonck Lieder. They were of course conceived at and for the piano, but we have become used to hearing Felix Mottl’s instrumentation of them. Wintle’s notes describe the original accompaniments as being ‘orchestral rather than elegantly pianistic’; Mottl’s versions are not always elegantly orchestral, but he ought to be credited for them in the booklet. Singer and conductor favour a small-scale approach; Gleich floats the phrase leading to ‘nieder-schwebt’ in ‘Der Engel’, observing the ‘zart’ marking – this is intimate and tender. In ‘Stehe still!’ the ‘mäßiger als zuvor’ marking (more moderate than before) encourages Bollon to jam the brakes on, and by the time they reach ‘langsamer’ (more slowly), Gleich is forced to cut short the tied note in ‘des Ew’gen Spur’, which disrupts the basic pulse. The scoring in ‘Schmerzen’ is Mottl’s weakest moment, with horns and solo trumpet thickening the texture. It also sounds uncomfortably low for Gleich. The two ‘Studies for *Tristan und Isolde*’ are the most successful here. In an expressive and well-judged ‘Im Treibhaus’, Gleich duets sensitively with solo violin, flute and viola lines, but she inserts an inappropriate breath in ‘öde Leere’; and the microphone picks up an exaggeratedly enunciated ‘arme Pflanze’. The restrained reading of ‘Träume’ shows off her attractive middle register and impressive control in the last phrases.

The booklet is informative, with an introduction by Gleich and Wintle’s notes, as well as full texts and good new translations by Mark Stone. The cover artwork is disturbingly reminiscent of Cream’s 1967 album *Disraeli Gears*; but this should not deter potential listeners: this is an interesting disc introducing a talented artist. It marks Gleich out as a fine potential Sieglinde, Elsa or Elisabeth, even if she lacks the vocal weight and stamina for Brünnhilde on this showing. The reading of the Wesendonck Lieder stands up well as an intimate view of this hybrid work; and the disc is worth acquiring for the *Die Feen* extract alone.