

had become the staple for funerals of French composers, kings and other grandees. In his entertaining booklet essay, Skip Sempé tells us that its score was revised and modernized numerous times throughout the eighteenth century. Despite Corrette's shameless lie that the version performed at Rameau's memorial was 'just as the Author composed it', the 1764 version is very different from that first heard at Gilles's own funeral back in 1705. New movements were added (one, oddly, based on an aria by the Italian composer Domenico Alberti); extracts from Rameau's operas set to Latin texts were inserted; and the instrumentation was expanded to include horns, oboes, bassoons, double bass (scarcely known in France in 1705), timpani with mutes and a carillon to imitate church bells. It also appears – although the notes are not entirely clear on this – that orchestral movements by Rameau were also performed, as they are on this recording.

The substantial revisions to Gilles's masterpiece do not represent an improvement. The original had a sublime and austere greatness that is somewhat swamped in the Corrette/Francoeur/Rebel arrangement. Reflecting the changing sensibilities in France from 1705 to 1765, a dignified and profoundly religious grief in Gilles's fairly intimate original became grander, more secular and overtly emotional in the updated version. The shift was from an essentially theological understanding of the purpose of a Requiem (seeking mercy for a departed sinner) to one that is closer to the common modern funeral convention of feeling sad and memorializing a life. Nonetheless, there is still enormous strength in the music and it is undeniably affecting. Sempé quotes the *Mercur de France* of October 1764: 'We witnessed that many people could not keep back their tears during the *Kyrie Eleison* of the Mass, adapted from the expressive music of one of the most beautiful passages of Rameau's works.'

Gilles's *Messe des morts* suffered further indignities after 1764. An 1805 edition by Joseph Supries added more wind instruments, including clarinets. These were not enough for Abbé Jean Prim, who, as recently as 1956, took the 1764 version by Corrette *et al* and bloated it with still more woodwinds, horns and trumpets. This soon became the 'standard' version of the Mass.

This reconstruction brings together the fine Belgian choir Collegium Vocale Gent (without its conductor Philippe Herreweghe) and the orchestra Capriccio Stravagante Les 24 Violons, all led by Sempé in a live recording from Sint Walburgakerk in Bruges. The performance took place about four months shy of the 250th anniversary of Rameau's funeral. I understand that the same programme was performed on September 17th and 18th, 2014 in the Oratoire du Louvre in Paris, where the original funeral took place. Despite the lack of audience

applause or other noise (no complaints on that score), this recording has a real sense of occasion. The Church of St Walburga is a beautiful building with a Baroque exterior and a largely neo-classical interior. It is certainly of suitable vintage for Rameau's era. One imagines that attending this performance would have been an extraordinary experience.

On disc, however, the sound is distant and diffuse. It is flattering neither to voices nor instruments and this probably explains why both Collegium Vocale and Capriccio Stravagante seem slightly less crisply articulated than usual. Nonetheless, both groups are impeccably stylish and as accomplished as ever. The overall effect is of sumptuous richness, not absolute precision. The quality of solo singing is variable and, again, some allowance should be made for the acoustic. The bass Lisandro Abadie and tenor Juan Sancho are the strongest singers: pleasant in tone and stylistically aware. *Haute-contre* Robert Getchell never seems to find a register that is entirely comfortable – but this is something of an occupational hazard for that distinctly French voice type, which lies between a tenor and a countertenor. Soprano Judith van Wanroij seems somewhat out of place in this music. I suspect she would be more at home with music from 1864.

However, this disc is certainly a highlight of Rameau's anniversary year, which has not received as much attention as it should. Rameau enthusiasts should relish this disc; Gilles purists may want to steer clear.

Andrew O'Connor

## Grieg

New

Ibsensangene, Op. 25. Vinjesangene, Op. 33. Haugtussa, Op. 67.

Marianne Beate Kielland (mezzo);

Nils Anders Mortensen (piano).

Lawo LWC1059 (full price, 1 hour 15 minutes).

Norwegian texts and English translations included.

Website [www.lawo.no](http://www.lawo.no). Producer Vegard Landaas.

Engineer Thomas Wolden. Dates January 4th and 5th, 2013.

One of the earliest surviving recordings of a song was made in 1888, an Edison cylinder of Grieg's 'God Morgen', Op. 21 No. 2, sung by Augusta Lütken (c.1855-1930) and, over 60 years ago, one of Frank Sinatra's few purely classical releases was a 10-inch 78 of Grieg's 'Jeg elsker dig' coupled with Tchaikovsky's 'None but the lonely heart' (both in English). These two random facts indicate that for a long time the most popular of Grieg's 180 songs were frequently heard – more often than not in translation – but today they remain something of an unknown quantity to singers and music lovers. This may be because we tend now not to accept songs performed in translation, and the Scandinavian languages which Grieg set are not as familiar to singers (or, indeed, teachers) as are French or German.

This is a pity, for the best of Grieg's songs should be known to all music lovers. It was the wartime Decca recordings by Astra Desmond which opened people's ears to the range and beauty of this music, following Kirsten Flagstad's first recording of Grieg's song cycle *Haugtussa*, which revealed this masterpiece of nineteenth-century Lieder for the first time. Thankfully, in recent decades we have seen a revival of interest in Grieg's songs, especially amongst Scandinavian singers, and the greatly gifted Marianne Beate Kielland is to be applauded for this new recording of three of Grieg's sets of songs, including the *Haugtussa* cycle.

Her voice is a very beautiful one, carefully and finely modulated throughout its range, and her inherent musical intelligence has produced a set of performances which will give much pleasure to many listeners. This CD has earned wide praise from Scandinavian critics, for reasons which are not hard to seek. But the greatness of Grieg as a songwriter is not merely confined to his melodic line, or his unerring ability to create the ideal mood for the text he has chosen. In this regard, I can do no more than refer readers to the finest and most complete study yet published of Grieg's songs, by Beryl Foster – whose excellent translations of the original texts are printed in the accompanying booklet with this issue. Foster's unrivalled study (*The Songs of Edvard Grieg*; Boydell & Brewer, second edition, 2007) covers every known song by Grieg; she is herself a noted interpreter of these songs and is fluent in the Norwegian language, and she admirably details the differences in Grieg's approach to the various writers whose texts he chose.

In this regard, Foster's comments are particularly valuable, for she is wholly convincing in demonstrating those differences. And, having known her book for many years, I cannot but feel that on this disc Kielland's approach to Garborg, Vinje and Ibsen is insufficiently varied to raise these fine performances to the exceptional class. Each of these 26 songs is beautifully performed, but they tend to be all the same, missing the underlying subtleties in the texts and in the music. For example, in the *Haugtussa* cycle, in the wonderfully light 'Killingdans' ('Goats' Kids Dance') she does not 'address', as it were, the goats but merely lists their names. Perhaps this is the result of a tempo that is a shade too fast – a slightly slower tempo would have enabled the character and life in the text to be expressed: Kielland is content to be more matter-of-fact, to the detriment of the song's more realistic underlying character. Much the same comment applies to the final song, 'Ved gjaetle-Bekken', in which the mountain maid addresses the brook as the progenitor of her moods; in this, Kielland merely appears to describe the stream, not addressing it as a living thing. In some respects, the recording quality, which is remarkably clean, appears a shade too clinical



for the proper creation of atmosphere, so that we admire the singer's voice production – and the excellently detailed playing of Nils Anders Mortensen – and not the inner qualities of the songs.

The earlier set of Ibsen songs (Op. 25) are more well known, individually and as a set, and these are very well sung in terms of line and creative characterization, but Kielland commits (for me) the cardinal sin of unnecessarily repeating the second half of 'Stamborgsrim' (No. 3), which is understandable only in the context of it being otherwise a very brief song, but the repeat completely negates the point of Ibsen's poem. It is not in the music, and although this practice has become common in many Scandinavian singers' performances of late, the impact of the brevity and inner psychological uncertainty in the text and in Grieg's setting is lost. Desmond's Decca 78 is the finest account on disc of this masterly gem that can surely have been issued. But 'Borte' (the fifth of the set) is exceptionally well performed here, as is the concluding 'En fuglevisse', with some magnificent *mezza-voce* and outstanding pianism.

The set of 12 Vinje songs also contains some fine performances, which will satisfy many, although the recording balance is again a shade (as we hear in 'Guten') too close for comfort – one wishes for a slightly more recessed and 'comfortable' acoustic, for here Kielland's top notes have a tendency (no more than that) to overwhelm the rest of the melodic line.

The singer ought not to have provided the booklet notes, for there are a number of unfortunate errors in Kielland's writing concerning the Vinje songs: she claims that Grieg met Vinje in Bergen in April 1880, but the poet died in 1870 and was the only one of the three major poets in this recital that Grieg never met! Nor were all of the Op. 33 songs completed in 1880; the seventh was composed in 1873 and the fifth in 1877, so the 12 songs in this set were not composed in the one month preceding the date of the last one, May 20th, 1880. Whilst the listener is enjoined by the singer to 'lend a friendly ear to our interpretations', which I for one was quite prepared to do, this friendship does not extend to indiscriminate acceptance of every aspect of this release, good as much of it is.

Robert Matthew-Walker

## Monteverdi

'Vesperi Solenni per la Festa di San Marco'.

Concerto Italiano/Rinaldo Alessandrini.

Naïve OP30557 (full price, 1 hour 20 minutes).

Italian texts and English/French translations included. Includes DVD documentary 'The Human and the Divine: Alessandrini conducts Monteverdi' by Claudio Rufa (52 minutes). Website [www.naive.fr](http://www.naive.fr). Producer Jean-Pierre Loislil. Engineer Laure Casenave-Père. Date December 2013.

This year Rinaldo Alessandrini and Concerto Italiano are celebrating the 30th anniversary of their founding – in Rome in 1984. The CD they've issued to mark the occasion – 'Trent'anni a Roma' (OP30563) – is an album of highlights from existing recordings selected by Alessandrini. Sadly, there's no background information on the reasons behind his choices – which would have been so revealing – nor anything very specific or interesting written about the genesis of Concerto Italiano itself. We have to make do with a poem, some rather generic stock-taking, and an insipid *Chaconne* composed by Alessandrini himself. But rather than cough up for this overpriced sampler, let's save our money instead for a new recording: Alessandrini's and Concerto Italiano's triumphant return to Claudio Monteverdi – the composer with whom they grew up, honed their skills and really established their reputation.

For this expensively produced release Alessandrini has assembled a magnificent vespers service – the sort of thing that might have been celebrated at St Mark's, Venice, during Monteverdi's time there. He's drawn principally upon Monteverdi's great collection of church music published in 1640 – the *Selva morale e spirituale* – though the splendid opening invocation 'Deus in adiutorium' comes from Monteverdi's well-known Vespers of 1610. Before each of the five psalms there's an appropriate plainsong antiphon sung to the St Mark's (rather than Roman) Rite; instead of repeating the chant after each psalm, which was what usually happened, Alessandrini follows St Mark's practice for Feast Days: substituting motets by Monteverdi and instrumental sonatas by his colleagues (Giovanni Gabrieli, Francesco Usper and Giovanni Battista Buonamente). This is a light-touch vespers – missing out lots of routine liturgical business and chant, but providing the right context for the main building blocks of the service – the object being to sound more like an act of worship than a straight concert. It does – thanks to the glorious acoustic.

Recording in St Mark's, Venice, itself is not a practical option these days, so instead Concerto Italiano headed off to the Basilica of Santa Barbara in Mantua – where Monteverdi worked immediately before coming to Venice, and where the music of the 1610 Vespers had its origins. The bonus DVD is very welcome here, giving us a tour of the church and an explanation of its perfect acoustic and ideal two-minute echo which render complex music cogent and detailed yet magnificently sonorous. The DVD, though rather simply spliced together, has complete takes of several works made during the recording process, which makes for fascinating viewing and for understanding where and why the voices and instruments are placed as they are. It was a nice touch to have a scholarly discussion between Alessandrini and his colleagues filmed

over an experimental supper with dishes from a cookbook contemporary with Monteverdi. I've cooked from this book by Bartolomeo Scappi myself, and while some of the flavours seem thoroughly modern – Scappi pioneered Parmesan – the seasoning in some of the savoury dishes does strike the modern palette as surprisingly sweet.

While Alessandrini looks distinctly unimpressed by the sixteenth-century flavours, he's certainly not afraid to season the music. While the bigger psalms and the *Magnificat* come with a few independent instrumental parts, Alessandrini follows contemporary practice and devises his own instrumental colour schemes. He uses the standard St Mark's line-up of two violins, two cornettos and four trombones to double vocal lines, and by alternating violins and cornettos on the top parts, he creates the essential elements of dialogue and contrast. A certain amount of idiomatic elaboration and decoration of these instrumental lines is encouraged, especially to heighten major cadential points. Doubling the voices with instruments, in the grand Venetian festival manner, leads to a natural slowing of speeds, and Alessandrini exploits this in all the bigger pieces, especially the *Magnificat*, where the great ringing tutti, which divide up the solo verses, progress with a statelier gait than we often hear in modern performances. Alessandrini has also had to knock the *Magnificat* into shape for this recording, completing the missing alto and bass parts in exemplary fashion.

The instrumental playing throughout the disc is technically superb and beautifully nuanced, and we get to hear so much more of what the players are doing because they are evenly matched by just one singer per line (singing in up to eight individual parts in the grandest pieces). Helped by the God-given acoustic, the recorded sound is revealing but rich; the balance between vocal and instrumental forces absolutely ideal. While avoiding the kind of wide-screen crescendos and dramatic gestures superimposed on Monteverdi by demonstrative conductors like John Eliot Gardiner, Alessandrini finds his expressive clues deeper in the music: responding to the simple battle-rhythms of *Dixit Dominus*, amplifying the engaging dialogues in the instrumental sonatas, and matching Monteverdi's exquisite contrapuntal repetitions with long, graduated build-ups of power ('a progenie in progenies' – 'from generation to generation' – in the *Magnificat*).

Thirty years ago Alessandrini and Concerto Italiano seemed to spring onto the Baroque scene fully formed; this recording shows just how far they've come since then. Speeds are more discerningly judged; musical structures are better understood; expressive gestures arise naturally from the music; and Monteverdi benefits most – he's in their blood.

Simon Heighes