

imagery is often powerful and visceral. Bjørnstad, however, steers clear of providing a musical analogue to Munch's texts. His style is rooted in jazz-style modal and harmonic inflections, reminiscent at times of ECM stablemates Keith Jarrett, Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays.

At times the words and music provide a strange union. This is illustrated most clearly in a series of short wordless recitatives and intermezzos that intersperse the text settings at various points. Frenetic free-form jazz punctuates two of the three recitatives – the most obvious representations on the disc of Munch's decline into insanity. The function of the intermezzos is less clear, however, but maybe these juxtapositions are precisely the point.

Bjørnstad's style is expressive rather than expressionist; lyrical, reflective, sometimes beautifully so, such as in the songs that feature vocalist Kari Bremnes ('The Mother' and 'Open Window'). There are also some very telling contributions from cellist Aage Kvalbein and dynamic double bassist Bjørn Kjellemyr, as well as the composer himself on piano. The Oslo Chamber Choir sing with an intelligence and understanding for both the words and the music, especially on 'As if they were in church'. But it's when Bjørnstad deliberately limits the expressive envelope (such as in the persistent two-chord pattern used in 'Open Window') that he gets closest to evoking Munch's elliptical and often unsettling poetic style. **Pwyll ap Siôn**

Brahms

Ein deutsches Requiem, Op 45

Sally Matthews *sop* **Christopher Maltman** *bar*
London Symphony Chorus and Orchestra /
Valery Gergiev

LSO Live (M) LSC00748 (64' • DDD • T/t)

Recorded live at the Barbican, London,
March 30 & 31, 2013



This hybrid SACD was recorded at the Barbican in March 2013 as part of the LSO's Brahms/Szymanowski festival. Although there are several splendid top choices for a *German Requiem* recording, this latest offering won't, alas, be joining them.

At the outset, however, all appears well; the veiled opening unfolds with a hushed, organic pulse. Choral entries are cleanly marked and draw out the text's emphases with an assured certainty. This continues into the extremely slow 'march in triple

time' second movement. Matters start to come adrift in the third movement, which lacks a sense of forward propulsion: one senses that the immaculately drilled chorus is straining at the leash. Occasionally it takes a bar or two for choir and orchestra to synchronise until the magnificent fugue stretches out over a pedal D.

The greatest error of judgement occurs in 'Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen', with a sudden and unnecessary *accelerando* which robs the second horn of its little moment of solo glory in bar 89. It's all too perfunctory and hurried. The sixth movement also starts at quite a trot (hardly *Andante*) and Gergiev proceeds to slash his way through the music from the *Vivace* onwards, forcing many small details of rhythm and diction to be obliterated. Of the soloists, Christopher Maltman is firm and forthright in his two solo passages, while Sally Matthews's unrelenting vibrato becomes wearying.

Gergiev's wayward approach to tempi and lack of nobility rule out this newcomer. Better to chose Gardiner's live recording for a more balanced approach, with a smaller, tauter chorus and a brighter-sounding orchestra. **Malcolm Riley**

Selected comparison:

ORR, Gardiner (5/12) (SDG) SDG706

Delbos • Messiaen

'Pour Mi'

Delbos *L'âme en bourgeon*

Messiaen *Poèmes pour Mi. Trois Mélodies*

Liv Elise Nordskog *sop* **Signe Bakke** *pf*

LAWO Classics (F) LWC1051 (52' • DDD/DSD • T)



Messiaen's song-cycle *Poèmes pour Mi* and his first wife Claire Delbos's *L'âme en bourgeon* were premiered in the same Paris concert in 1937. Reuniting these works on disc for the first time is the fascinating premise for this recording by the Norwegian soprano Liv Elise Nordskog and pianist Signe Bakke.

The connections between the cycles go further: Delbos sets a collection of poems by Cécile Sauvage – Messiaen's mother – written while she was pregnant with her son. Delbos's setting was composed while she herself was pregnant with her own child, at the same time as Messiaen was writing the song-cycle inspired by his wife and given her own pet-name of 'Mi'.

Biographically this makes for beautiful programming but musically it's also a fascinating pairing. The textural drama of Messiaen's cycle – by turns wilfully ugly

('Epouvante') and delicately inscrutable ('Ta voix') give way to the melodic unfolding of Delbos's songs – sustained and lyrical, even in their moments of extremity.

Debilitating mental illness cut short Delbos's career as a composer and *L'âme en bourgeon* represents a major work in a very small oeuvre. The musical voice here, however, is already distinctive – harmonically freer than Messiaen's but sharing a recognisably similar aesthetic.

Technically the Messiaen is far more challenging, demanding extremes of range and vocal colour from the singer and significant virtuosity from the pianist. Both Nordskog and Bakke give refined, idiomatic performances, finding the intimacy if not always the emotional excess of these songs. Just occasionally though, Nordskog betrays the difficulty of what she is doing, hesitating on the edge of the music's precipices and holding back in tone colour or muscular conviction.

A booklet essay (translated into English) offers a close reading of these rarely heard works, though non-Norwegian speakers should note that the poems only appear in French and Norwegian. **Alexandra Coghlan**

Ferrandini

'Al Santo Sepolcro'

Il pianto di Maria Vergine.

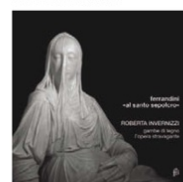
O spettacolo pur troppo funesto

Roberta Invernizzi *sop*

L'Opera Stravagante; Gambe di Legno

Fra Bernardo (F) FB1401231 (55' • DDD)

Recorded live



Munich and then retired to Padua – where he met the young Mozart in 1771. In fact, there are some tangential connections between the two composers: Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* and *Idomeneo* were both composed for Munich's Residenz court theatre, which was inaugurated in 1753 with Ferrandini's *Catone in Utica*. His *Il pianto di Maria Vergine* was formerly thought (wrongly) to be composed by Handel 30-odd years earlier, and dissimilar recordings by Anne Sofie von Otter with Musica Antiqua Köln (Archiv, 7/94), Agnès Mellon with Arion (earlymusic.com), Bernarda Fink with Il Giardino Armonico (L'Oiseau-Lyre, 9/09) and Maria Keohane with the European Union Baroque Orchestra (ERP, 4/14) confirm that Ferrandini's sepulchral cantata is a plangent miniature masterpiece.