

**Paul HINDEMITH (1895-1963)**

***The Long Christmas Dinner*** - An Opera

(1960/61) [48:49]

Camille Zamora (soprano) - Lucia I/II

Sara Murphy (mezzo) - Mother

Bayard/Ermengarde

Jarrett Ott (baritone) - Roderick/Sam

Josh Quinn (bass-baritone) - Brandon

Glenn Seven Allen (tenor) - Charles

Catherine Martin (mezzo) - Genevieve

Kathryn Guthrie (soprano) - Leonora

Scott Murphree (tenor) - Roderick II

American Symphony Orchestra/Leon Botstein

rec. 2014, Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York City

**BRIDGE 9449** [48:49]



This is a rather rare and special disc. Rare, because as far as I can tell this is the first recording in the original English language of this late Hindemith opera and special because it is very good.

Hindemith conducted the first English performance of the opera at the Juilliard School in New York just nine months before his death in December 1963. For the libretto he persuaded Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) to collaborate with him in adapting his own one-act play of the same name that he had written thirty years previously. Wilder remains a cornerstone of the American literary and theatrical establishment but was notoriously unwilling to allow his works to be used for alternative theatrical or musical use. Hence although *The Matchmaker* did make it to the stage as Jerry Herman's *Hello Dolly*, he refused permission for his most famous works; *Our Town* and *The Skin of our Teeth*. The latter was mooted as a musical by Bernstein - which the author accepted - but when that venture collapsed he rejected Bernstein's further approach to make it an opera. According to the liner written by Tappan Wilder - Wilder's nephew and literary executor - he was extremely well versed in music in general and opera in particular as well as many languages. Skills, one imagines, that must help the collaborative process between composer and librettist a lot.

The dramatic conceit behind this highly compressed work is essentially a simple one. The drama is presented in a single fluid sequence of Christmas dinners in one household over a period of ninety years. There is no significance with it being Christmas except that it is a day that brings families together so the audience witnesses the succeeding generations in the same setting. Apparently Orson Welles credited the original play as the inspiration behind the famous 'breakfast-montage' sequence in *Citizen Kane* where the audience witnesses the changing/decaying relationship between Kane and his first wife. Hindemith writes in a similarly fluid style - there is little division between scenes. He uses recurring motifs to signify the passing years. Wilder's libretto revisits moments of perfunctory conversation that will be familiar to every family; "how many years have we lived here?", "you were missed at church today", "I remember when ..." With such conversational text it comes as no surprise that Hindemith writes in an arioso/recitative style - this reminded me in technique if not style of that used by Vaughan Williams in his equally compact and dramatically potent *Riders to the Sea*. There are few if any arias or indeed ensembles. That being said a highlight of the score is a dramatically moving and technically brilliant sextet where Sam, one of the central family's sons is on leave from the army. He tells his family to act exactly as normal so he has memories to treasure and over their prattling inconsequential small talk he sings a touching counter-melody chorale-like song; "I will hold this tight! I shall remember you!"

To give some sense of the dramatic compression at work: Sam exits; "and so good-bye",

the *next* line of the text laments his death in the war "He was only a boy, a mere boy ... What can we do ... only time can help " and the line following *that* has moved the plot forward by some years and introduces another character on another Christmas day. Memory, memorial and how we live through the actions and memories of our relatives past and future lie at the heart of this work. The house is the unchanging focal point - although the closing line of the work is "And they're building a new house" but it is the lives of the inhabitants of the house that count.

Not because the text is convoluted or opaque this is an opera that requires considerable concentration if you are not quite literally to lose the plot. Fortunately the entire libretto - in English and Hindemith's own German translation - is included. Layers of potential confusion are added by the fact that - as with many families - certain names are passed down hence we have two Lucias and two Rodericks. Even *more* confusion comes from the fact that the same singer sings both Lucias and another sings two different roles. Seen live, this might be clear through transitions of costume or setting - with only the ear to guide — blink (in an auditory sense) and you will have dropped a decade. My sole observation with this as a piece of theatre is, I wonder if the compression prevents the audience becoming engaged with any individual character - they simply do not inhabit the stage long enough. That being said, Wilder's drawing of character is so searching and well-observed that I think most of us would recognise personality types and scenarios from our own experience that give weight and resonance to these precisely-drawn sketches.

Hindemith makes no attempt to place the music in time or place. Just the opposite in fact - his chamber orchestra includes a rather anachronistic harpsichord. This was surely the right decision - with such an express journey over the best part of a century it would end up a patch-work of pastiche. Neither does he make any particular significance of it being Christmas except for the work's brief Prelude//Introduction which is a rather curdled and harmonically dense take on "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" - which is about as un-merry as it is possible to imagine. In the essay accompanying the disc by Joel Haney he describes the work as one "which ponders the experience of time as a condition of human possibility and limitation - 'the bright and the dark' - through the rise and decline of an American bourgeois family". The brilliance of both authors lies in the way they tie this sense of continuity across time - Hindemith's is a slightly subtler skill because he uses fragments of melody and motif which burrow into the subconscious so by the second or third listen the ear begins to pick up on the connections the music is making with recurring characters situations or text. Hence, this is the work of a master-craftsman. As so often, I find the accusation of Hindemith being a dry or dusty composer wholly without justification. No, he does not write big arching overtly emotional melodies. Rather he points to subtler, more 'real' scenarios which have resonance and truth for the engaged audience member.

So to this performance; Leon Botstein and his American Symphony Orchestra clearly thrive on the discovery and performance of little-known and under-appreciated works. In the past with some of the grander-scale and overtly Romantic works I have found Botstein's approach to be a degree clinical and unwilling to unbutton. Here the precision and measured emotion of Hindemith's score seems to chime perfectly with his aesthetic. This is a recording of a single live performance which given the ensemble complexities and unfamiliarity of the piece is remarkably good. There is no audible audience noise - my only sorrow is that the hall ambience is cut off very quickly at the end of the work - to preclude applause one supposes. The orchestra play very well - the engineering places the instruments quite closely behind the voices which occasionally obscures the text. All of the singers are of a very high standard and fortunately most of the text is sung with commendable clarity. Of particular brilliance is the beautifully light and clear singing of Kathryn Guthrie as Leonora. Indeed the entire cast are excellent both in ensemble and individually. None make any attempt to 'age' their voices with their characters - something perhaps an actor in the original theatrical version might.

Bridge present this single CD in a double CD case - presumably to allow for the thicker than usual liner/libretto. As well as the text the liner includes the usual performer biographies as well as two useful essays about the work. The disc runs for less than fifty minutes but so concentrated and complete in itself is the work that a filler would seem inappropriate and unnecessary. A fascinating and rather moving work. It reveals Hindemith and Wilder as masters of the slow-burn potent theatrical experience which lingers in the memory for the power of its insight into the human condition.

***Nick Barnard***