

## Mahler · Schoenberg

**Mahler** Kindertotenlieder. Rückert-Lieder.

Des Knaben Wunderhorn – Das irdische

Leben; Scheiden und Meiden; Aus! Aus!

**Schoenberg** Lieder, Op 2

**Anne Schwanewilms** *sop* **Malcolm Martineau** *pf*

Onyx Ⓢ ONYX4146 (67' • DDD • T/t)



This second Onyx disc from Anne Schwanewilms follows on from a recital of

songs by Liszt and Mahler (3/13) but sees the German soprano delving deeper into mezzo repertoire with the *Kindertotenlieder* and *Rückert-Lieder*. The results are mixed, and inevitably her voice – unusually ‘instrumental’ in quality, almost hollow-sounding in its glass-like clarity at the top, turning a little sour when pushed down below – brings a strangely wraith-like character to the *Kindertotenlieder*. As pure singing it’s often eccentric, and she sometimes swells and swoops unattractively. But the sound she makes also feels appropriate for the songs, each of which Schwanewilms, in her own booklet essay, describes as marking out five stages of grief from denial to acceptance. It translates into a performance of impressive cumulative power in which the soprano’s commitment and seriousness cannot be faulted; nor can the supreme sensitivity of Malcolm Martineau’s beautifully gauged accompaniment.

It will be up to readers, however, as to whether they are happy to accept Schwanewilms’s anaemic timbre instead of the richer voices of better-known mezzo alternatives (or mezzo-tinged sopranos). The same goes for the *Rückert-Lieder*. ‘Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen’ is beautifully done, with moments of exquisite hush, but the lack of mid-range volume is noticeable in ‘Um Mitternacht’, where the tessitura just doesn’t sit right for this soprano. I was even less convinced, meanwhile, by the three *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* songs on the disc, for which Schwanewilms doesn’t seem to be either vocally or temperamentally suited, sounding stretched in some uncomfortable ‘Ade’s in ‘Scheiden und Meiden’. She’s a great deal more convincing in the early Schoenberg songs that open the programme, even if her big voice never feels entirely under control here either. The microphones struggle to catch it, too, although the piano is beautifully captured. **Hugo Shirley**

## Pärt

‘Babel’

Magnificat. Beaitudines. Nunc dimittis.

Drei Hirtenkinder aus Fátima. The Deer’s Cry.

Da pacem Domine. An den Wassern zu Babel sassen wir und weinten. Littlemore Tractus.

Vater unser

**Wilten Boys’ Choir / Johannes Stecher** *org/pf*

Col Legno Ⓢ WWE1CD20427 (57' • DDD)



The origins of the Innsbruck-based Wilten Boys’ Choir stretch back to the

13th century. Their director since 1991 has been Johannes Stecher. He has nourished a carefully moulded – though distinctive – choral sound, notable for its vibrato-laden top treble line (which imparts just enough of a hint of fragility to be refreshing) coupled with super-smooth and firm tenor and bass registers. This 80th-birthday tribute to Arvo Pärt claims to be the first-ever disc of his vocal music performed by a boys’ choir, and includes two premiere recordings.

For some listeners, 57 minutes’ worth of Pärt may be too much to take in one sitting. Although much of the programme matches Philip Borg-Wheeler’s description of Pärt’s style as ‘unruffled tranquillity’, there are a few moments of unbuttoned ecstasy, for example in the *Littlemore Tractus* and the light-hearted, almost folksy *Drei Hirtenkinder aus Fátima*, composed as recently as 2014. The highlight of the disc is the affecting setting of *By the Waters of Babylon*. Its soaring phrases perfectly match the acoustics of the Tyrolean churches where these tracks were taped in 2013-14. The final outburst is truly spine-tingling.

On the other hand, *The Deer’s Cry* (sung in English) becomes rather wearisome. Another bonus is Stecher’s splendid organ-playing, for example in the ‘mashed-up’ distortion of elements from Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor which concludes the 2011 version of *The Beatitudes*. As a curious appendix, the short *Vater unser* is sung by an uncredited treble soloist with a remarkably fruity quasi-contralto voice. A mixed result, therefore, which Pärt completists will, though, surely relish.

**Malcolm Riley**

## Praetorius

**H Praetorius** Magnificat quarti toni. O quam pulchra es. Quam pulchra es, amica mea. Surge, propera, amica mea. Tota pulchra es. Vulnerasti cor meum **J Praetorius** Indica mihi. Quam pulchra es. Veni in hortum meum **M Praetorius** Magnificat per omnes versus super ut re mi fa sol la. Nigra sum sed formosa

**Balthasar Neumann Choir and Ensemble /**

**Pablo Heras-Casado**

Archiv Ⓢ 479 4522AH (72' • DDD • T/t)