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October 2009 , vol 74 , no.4

RECORDINGS

Editor's Choice

ADÈS: *THE TEMPEST*

□ *Sieden, Royal; Keenlyside, Bostridge, Spence, Langridge; Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Adès. English text. EMI Classics 6952342 (2)*

O Brave New World

Thomas Adès leads the first recording of The Tempest, his transcendently beautiful opera based on Shakespeare's play.



Thomas Adès's much-anticipated opera of *The Tempest* had its world premiere at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 2004. Covent Garden revived Tom Cairns's staging of the opera in March 2007 with most of the original cast members, and this EMI Classics debut recording springs from that production, which included some revisions to the original score. Adès (b. 1971), a fascinating, wholly original composer who seems to thrive on his own unpredictability, confounded expectations yet again with a moving, deeply felt piece, which, though it bears his unmistakable hallmarks of brash irreverence and brilliant iconoclasm, also has the courage to be simple, direct, warm and — yes — transcendently beautiful when called for.

Instead of appropriating Shakespeare verbatim or with abridgment, librettist Meredith Oakes has constructed pithy, Shakespeare-derived verses of her own. To her credit, her compact text is much more singable and gives the composer plenty of room to flower, even though her ostensibly rhyming couplets are riddled with false rhymes. The lack of precision is distracting, even if the streamlining of the text is impressive.

Not all of *The Tempest* is easy to listen to; extended passages are dense and uncompromising. Yet as Shakespeare's boisterous characters move toward their ultimate destinations of forgiveness and love, so too does Adès's score gradually take on the comforting glow of poignancy and tonal warmth. Caliban's "Friends don't fear" (derived from Shakespeare's "Be not afraid") is pure, serene A-Major. Arising from the dissonant thickets that have preceded it, this deployment of diatonic harmony is as much of a dramatic shock as the use of blaring discords would be in the hands of a different composer. As the native man-beast Caliban, the refined yet adventurous tenor Ian Bostridge soars grandly in this aria but calls up startling menace elsewhere, to great effect.

Adès has outdone himself in his rendering of Ariel, the island sprite, as a whacked-out coloratura soprano, Mozart's Queen of the Night put through a blender. Cyndia Sieden manages the Olympic-caliber vocal athletics, which are just as challenging musically and intervallically as they are in terms of register, which is vertiginous. Sieden's mastery of a role whose difficulty seems to be gleefully





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deliberate is jaw-dropping. True, ninety percent of her words are incomprehensible, but this is the composer's fault, not hers. For her "Five fathoms deep" aria (from Shakespeare's "Full fathom five"), Adès slows Ariel's hyperkinetic pace down to a dirge, with each syllable sustained for several beats. The opening intervals are preposterous, starting on D, leaping up an octave and a step to high E, then down two octaves and a half step to D-sharp. Gradually, however, the melody becomes less angular, the harmonies turn ethereal, and the aria becomes a truly extraordinary siren call, hypnotic and captivating.

Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan who conjures the eponymous tempest and shipwrecks his enemies on the island, has (dare one say it?) more of a dramatic arc in *Adès/Oakes* than he does in Shakespeare, where he is more godlike in his machinations; here, he has less control over events and is angered when thwarted. Simon Keenlyside, for whom the difficult role was written, is just as convincing in Prospero's frustrated rages as he is beneficent in his forgiveness. As his daughter Miranda, soprano Kate Royal delivers an exquisite aria in the first scene that is the first ray of sunshine in the score. Later, Royal joins Toby Spence (Ferdinand) for a love duet of Straussian rapture, but with dissonant interpolations from woodwinds and trilling violins, signaling obstacles yet to be overcome.

As Alonso, King of Naples, Philip Langridge grieves over his son Ferdinand (who he believes is dead) in an unutterably poignant aria laced with painfully penetrating chromaticism. The Act III quintet, a stately triple-meter passacaglia in which the King and Ferdinand are reunited, surges magnificently and caps the opera perfectly; this is the work of a mature artist, not an impetuous enfant terrible.

The composer himself conducts the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, which churns, lunges, erupts and shimmers with equal dexterity. Bear with Adès throughout the opera's more forbidding passages; it's challenging, to be sure, but the composer has a grand plan, and your close attention will be opulently rewarded. □

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