

CD REVIEW

Johann Friedrich Reichardt, *Die Geisterinsel*

Rheinische Kantorei and Das Kleine Konzert, Hermann Max *cond*
CPO 777548-2, 2017 (2 CDs: 152 minutes)

A recording from the Rheinische Kantorei and Das kleine Konzert led by Hermann Max sheds new light on a German operatic tale from the 1790s. In the opera, a wise man seeks to protect a cherished young woman from the activities of his enemies, to put her ideal suitor through a test of worthiness, and to win a battle against evil magic. The opera, however, is not Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, but one of the many other magic operas that found an enthusiastic public during the period: Johann Friedrich Reichardt's *Die Geisterinsel*. Reichardt's Singspiel sets to music a libretto based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter and Friedrich Hildebrand von Einsiedel. It was first premiered in 1798 in the Nationaltheater in Berlin to limited success; however, a year later it began receiving strong reviews and was frequently performed until 1825. For scholars or students of late eighteenth-century opera, as well as the history of Shakespeare adaptation, this recording is an exceedingly helpful document. It also brings to life a number of the musical strengths, and indeed delights, of Reichardt's work, even as it inevitably reveals some of his weaknesses as a composer for the theatre. For a general audience, an important gap in the accompanying documentation may also make it difficult for some listeners to fully grasp the opera's dramatic content.

Walter Salmen's short but illuminating liner notes for the recording address the opera's literary and musical aspects and build upon his extensive research on Reichardt, as well as on Thomas Baumann's work on the opera, in the form of an edition with introduction of the facsimile score as part of the series *German Opera 1770–1800: A Collection of Facsimiles of Printed and Manuscript Full Scores* (Garland, 1986). The libretto was completed by Einsiedel and Gotter by the early 1790s. A writer at the Weimar court, Einsiedel would have likely been exposed to Goethe's efforts in the Singspiel genre, which included a fragmentary attempt at a sequel to *Die Zauberflöte*. Intending first to offer *Die Geisterinsel* to Mozart, the two librettists did not manage to do so before his death, and so they moved on to Ditters von Dittersdorf, who also did not end up setting the libretto. Before Reichardt eventually completed his version, the composers Friedrich Fleischmann and Friedrich Haack had also made settings; the more well-known lied composer Johann Rudolf Zumsteeg also composed a version in 1798. Reichardt began the composition of this Shakespearean comedy full of magic and spectacle with some previous experience rendering the Shakespearean supernatural in music; he had composed music to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in 1787, which included effective accompaniments to the scenes involving the witches.

Comprising three acts, the Singspiel preserves the main characters and plot outline from *The Tempest* but does not draw as much critical and playful attention to its status as theatre as does Shakespeare's original. (For example, the masque featured in Shakespeare's play is dropped from the libretto.) In the opera, the rightful Duke of Milan, Prospero, lives in exile on an enchanted island with his daughter Miranda, while a tyrant rules the Duchy of Milan in his absence. On the island he is in league with good magical forces and has the spirit Ariel at his command. Although he also has traditionally had power over the misshapen, evil Caliban, over the course of the opera Caliban calls upon malevolent spirits to attempt to overthrow Prospero through a set of conspiratorial plots, in the hope of also having Miranda to himself. At the end of the first act, a powerful storm leaves several men shipwrecked on the island. Among them is Fernando (the son of the King of Naples), his best friend Fabio, and two other passengers, Oronzio and Stefano. Fernando and Miranda fall in love, and Prospero develops plans to test Fernando and to protect the couple in their journey toward matrimony. Meanwhile, Caliban develops a plan with Oronzio and Stefano to kill Prospero and Fernando. Through the help of the good supernatural forces at his command, Prospero foils both plots in the last act; a new ship arrives and the sailors deliver the news that a tyrant no longer rules Milan and Prospero can safely return to his home and his rightful position.

Reichardt's compositional activity was not limited to Singspiel, but included most of the other public, large-scale genres important in his day. In more recent music-historical discourse, Reichardt is perhaps best known for his role in the history of the lied and the Liederspiel – a cousin of the Singspiel designed to keep the sung moments in the orbit of the simpler lied genre rather than more complex operatic structures. While his overall lied output embraced some song genres implying dramatic complexity, much of his song oeuvre involves lieder that were composed in a relatively folkish style, as well as 'gesellige' lieder for multiple voices that make this style choral. This tuneful side of Reichardt's compositional practice also shines through in *Die Geisterinsel*, where it combines with a strong bent toward pastoral rhythmic topics and wind-instrument passages to evoke life on the enchanted island. Charming, near-folkish homophonic writing for the chorus appears at the very start of Act 1, where a chorus of spirits takes over a minuet melody that had previously been introduced in the orchestra. This skill with simplicity informs not only a handful of the solo arias, but even aspects of the longer act finales. For example, Reichardt does not shy away from suddenly paring down full, complex ensemble textures to introduce barely accompanied, homophonic duets for short vocal interjections from Fernando and Miranda in the Act 2 finale.

In his ensemble numbers, Reichardt pays attention to dramatic fluidity. For example, in the Act 1 duet between Prospero and Miranda, 'Vernimm die Schrecken, die uns drohn', Reichardt moves quickly from a contrasting presentation of the two characters in the duet texture over a staccato, creeping bass motive, to an effective passage in accompanied recitative, then back to the earlier music, and eventually back to accompanied recitative. Elsewhere Reichardt uses ensembles to give a particular character a chance to stand out with novel musical effects, as in the quintet in Act 2, 'O was das betrifft'. Here the spirit Ariel enjoys multiple chances to engage in delightful musical laughter. While some of Reichardt's writing for the orchestra could be called merely conventionally effective – such as the swirling minor-key string passages he uses for storm music – in other places his use of the orchestra is more ingenious. In a scene where Prospero turns his enemies to stone, the strings limp along like unmovable boulders in very humorous

augmented sixth chords that are in no hurry to resolve; and in Fabio's Act 2 aria, 'Ich küsse dich, o Schleier', Reichardt employs a luminous combination of obbligato clarinet and harp.

For all of its more beautiful and entertaining moments, Reichardt's score suffers in the larger solo or ensemble numbers, which do not contain enough musical or dramatic richness to sustain their length, and the general dramatic pacing of the whole work could be tighter. In this recording cuts seem to have been made only to some portions of the dialogue; in further performances other cuts for the sake of dramatic pacing might be possible. Unfortunately, any non-German speaking consumer of this CD would not be in a good position to judge the drama. The CD booklet contains the original German text and English translations for the musical portions only, although the recording also contains the full German-language spoken dialogue of the Singspiel. I consulted a German-language, full-text transcription of the libretto online (www.zeno.org) in order to follow the dialogue as clearly as possible. If I had needed an English translation to understand the dialogue, I would have been in some trouble. The absence of translated spoken dialogue in the CD booklet is thus a major drawback to the otherwise excellent quality of the materials; it implies that listeners without expert German knowledge should content themselves with not knowing what is happening in each scene.

On a whole, the performance is of very high quality. Among the sung performances, several stand out. Soprano Romelia Lichtenstein as Ariel conveys spritely energy with a light, clarion delivery at every turn, and Barbara Hannigan as Fabio sings so beautifully, especially in the above-mentioned aria with harp and clarinet, that one simply wants to put her performance on a continuous loop. Bass Ekkehard Abele excels as Prospero, projecting sonorous authority and showing dramatic and comedic prowess. Bass Tom Sol steadily conveys Caliban's monstrous quality through deft vocal inflections, and tenor Markus Schäfer sings Fernando with a lovely, lyrical approach. While soprano Ulrike Staude, as Miranda, has a round, warm and striking vocal timbre, she often misses chances to inject true dramatic urgency into her singing and does not execute the more virtuosic passages with complete surety. Hermann Max's work with the orchestra and chorus produces clear and often beautiful sounds and textures. It is to be hoped that this recording will inspire further experiments with productions of *Die Geisterinsel* that highlight the strongest aspects of one of Reichardt's most successful achievements; a deft staging, or perhaps a video production, could highlight the spectacle and magic that are central to the work.

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