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JUSTIN HEINRICH KNECHT (1752–1817)

*DIE AEOLSHARFE, ODER DER TRIUMPH DER MUSIK UND LIEBE*

Christina Landshamer (soprano), Mark Adler (tenor), Andrea Lauren Brown (soprano), Patrick Pobeschin (baritone), Andreas Macco (bass), Thomas E. Bauer (bass), Johannes Kaleschke (tenor), Markus Brutscher (tenor), Sarah Wegener (soprano), Maria van Eldik (soprano), Adolph Seidel (bass) / Kammerchor Stuttgart / Hofkapelle Stuttgart / Frieder Bernius  
Carus-Verlag, Carus 83.220, 2009; three discs, 149 minutes

Justin H. Knecht is perhaps best known for his characteristic symphony *Le portrait musical de la nature* (1785). This multi-movement depiction of the anticipation, arrival and retreat of a storm in an idyllic setting is believed by scholars to be an important precursor to the scherzo in Beethoven's Symphony No. 6. Knecht's keen interest in employing unusually varied orchestral colour to depict external, often natural phenomena found expression in a major compositional project towards the end of his life. The project was, however, not instrumental in genre; rather, the dramatic potential of his orchestral writing combined with his prowess in vocal composition resulted in his four-act 'romantic opera' *Die Aeolsharfe, oder der Triumph der Musik und Liebe* (1808).

*Die Aeolsharfe* features the mythical Aeolian people – an idealized society in which the arts reign supreme – at a pivotal moment in their history: the invention of the Aeolian harp. Played by wind alone to produce enchanted sounds likened to the music of the spheres, the instrument is deemed capable of awakening human feeling and penetrating barbarian hearts, ultimately transcending racial difference to unite humanity (as seen in Act 1 No. 5 (a chorus) and Act 1 No. 19 (the finale)). Once articulated at the outset of the opera, these worthy claims concerning the instrument are then put to the test. Melilla, daughter of Phrynis (inventor of the Aeolian harp), is elected high priestess and charged with the duty of protecting the instrument, for which a natural 'throne' has been found on a steep rocky cliff. When the harp's wondrous sound attracts the attention of a passing troop of barbarians led by Selim, Melilla is unable to prevent the theft of the instrument. In their brief initial encounter, Selim (described by his servant Bull as possessing a heart of stone) and Melilla fall in love at first sight. In short, the Aeolian harp is capable not only of penetrating Selim's heart, enabling him to love Melilla, but also of sanctioning the union between Aeolian and (former) barbarian, though only after a series of narrative twists.

Frieder Bernius's splendid recording of a fine representative example of German opera of this period is undoubtedly a valuable asset for researchers, enthusiasts and educators alike. An internationally acclaimed interpreter of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music, Bernius continues to play a leading role in uncovering and recording outstanding, though little-known, German operatic works of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His releases, of Johann G. Naumann's *Aci e Galatea* (Orfeo, C22022H (2002)) and Franz Schubert's two-act opera *Sakontala* (Carus, 83218 (2008)), for instance, have contributed to recent scholarly interest in this repertory. As was the case with *Sakontala* for Schubert, *Die Aeolsharfe* was never performed in Knecht's lifetime, for reasons that have yet to be discovered. Bernius's laudable efforts to restore and make known fine operatic works outside of the canon are not without challenges. Regrettably, it was not possible to record the opera in its entirety (presumably as a result of cost); however, the texts of the omitted numbers (and there are quite a few) are elegantly included in the booklet, distinguished with grey, rather than black, text. The three CDs are accompanied by an informative booklet containing, among other things, the complete libretto by Nikolaus Remmele (1773–1811). Brief French and English summaries of the plot and useful essential information concerning the composer are provided, though the translations occasionally come across a touch stilted. Complete translations of the libretto would have been a wonderful addition. Most of all, what I found missing were descriptions of scenery for the opera (one can only assume that these would have been included in the libretto, since the notes in the booklet refer to Selim's troops sailing by in a ship along the Aeolian shores at the beginning of Act 2, and yet there is no such indication in the text provided). Given that the opera exists only as an autograph in the Wieland-Archiv in Biberach, and



is therefore more difficult to access than other operas of this period, and in view of the strikingly pervasive role of nature in the opera, this small inclusion would have added much for the listener. Nevertheless, these minor regrets stem from the multitude of intriguing issues raised by making this opera accessible and hardly detract from a masterful recording.

Bernius directs the renowned Hofkappelle Stuttgart with elegance and finesse. Knecht's orchestral writing features frequent interplay between woodwind and strings, which Bernius handles with subtlety. The overture in particular is played with fiery enthusiasm and a marked sense of dramatic intensity. Some of the thematic material in the overture also recurs in a short orchestral number intended to depict the sound of the Aeolian harp (Act 1 No. 15, 'Spiel der Aeolsharfe'). Although the instrument is described visually as a 'Saiteninstrument' (stringed instrument) within the context of the opera, it becomes evident that it finds its sonic identity primarily in the woodwind section. According to Franz Schlegel's notes, Knecht included instructions on imitating the sound of the Aeolian harp with woodwind positioned in the wings of the theatre behind the scenery to create the sound of a distant organ (page 11 in the booklet). The concept of evoking the music of the spheres by means of orchestral instruments is a fascinating one; readers interested in this topic would do well to consult Emily I. Dolan's excellent recent article on this topic ('E. T. A. Hoffmann and the Ethereal Technologies of Nature Music', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 5/1 (2008), 7–26).

Knecht's choral pieces are also well executed by the Kammerchor Stuttgart. Their subtle text inflection and perfectly unified vowels produce choral singing characterized by impeccably clear diction whilst not sacrificing warmth of tone. Equally striking is their stunningly beautiful melodic phrasing and unity of ensemble. Listeners have the great pleasure of hearing this ensemble throughout the opera, as it is featured in the guise of various groups: members of the household of Phrynis, the chorus of Aeolians, troop of barbarians, chorus of Aeolian soldiers and so forth. Most breathtaking of all is their Act 4 appearance as a chorus of Aeolians singing a 'Chorale in modo hypoceolio' (Act 4 No. 86). This short, deceptively simple piece is executed with great dramatic effect. Again, a brighter vocal colouring of German vowels produces a lighter though still complex sonority, which, at the tapering of phrases, produces an almost luminescent effect.

Featured soloists include lyric tenor Mark Adler as Selim, soprano Christina Landshamer as Melilla, bass Thomas E. Bauer as Hierokles and bass Andreas Macco as Phrynis. Adler's opening aria, 'Was der Liebe reines Weben' (Act 2 No. 27), serves to establish Selim's role as tenor hero from the outset. In a sense this foreshadows his relationship with the heroine Melilla, even though the details of the narrative have yet to be worked out. Adler's performance of this aria is breathtaking indeed. His lengthy melodic lines are performed effortlessly while maintaining a subtle sense of lyricism and expression. Soprano Christina Landshamer's showcase arias demand agility, lightness and grace for the rapid passagework and the extensive ornamentation typically demanded by her character type. The technically difficult opening statement of her first aria 'Sternenrein und Sonnenhell' (Act 1 No. 10) seemed ever so slightly unstable, though she executes the remainder of the aria and her subsequent pieces with brilliance, vitality and ease. When the lovers are finally united in the last act, they sing a duet, 'Leer von Liebe' (Act 4 No. 77), which is surely an embodiment of the quintessential love duet in early nineteenth-century German opera. Landshamer and Adler join together to sing charming sentimental melodic lines that seem to float over the top of the lilting orchestral writing, yet their performance never appears overblown. In fact, a carefully negotiated interplay between soloists and orchestra as well as a quick tempo, under the direction of Bernius, leads to a performance marked by sophistication. Had the work been performed in Knecht's lifetime, this would doubtless have been a favourite number.

All in all, this is a first-rate recording of a deserving large-scale work. One can only hope that Bernius will continue to unveil such dazzling recordings of worthy exemplars of this repertory.

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