

Gregory Berg

Christa Ludwig: The Birthday Edition.

Christa Ludwig, mezzo soprano and clinician; Stella Grigorian, mezzo soprano; Valerij Serkin, tenor; Marcus Pelz, baritone; Charles Spencer, Sophie Raynaud, piano. (ArtHaus Musik 102 147/ 102 149; 116:00, 111:00)

Schubert: *Die Winterreise*: "Gute Nacht," "Die Wetterfahne," "Gefror'ne Thränen," "Erstarrung," "Der Lindenbaum," "Wasserfluth," "Auf dem Flusse," "Rückblick," "Irrlicht," "Rast," "Frühlingstraum," "Einsamkeit," "Die Post," "Der greise Kopf," "Die Krähe," "Letzte Hoffnung," "Im Dorfe," "Der stürmische Morgen," "Täuschung," "Der Wegweiser," "Das Wirtshaus," "Muth!" "Die Nebensonnen," "Der Leiermann." "Geheimnis," "Im Abendrot," "Die Forelle," "Der Tod und das Mädchen," "Sehnsucht," "Der Musensohn." Mahler: "Ich ging mit Lust," "Rheinlegendchen," "Das irdische Leben," "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen," "Scheiden und Meiden." Wolf: "Anakreons Grab," "Der Gärtner," "Bedeckt mich mit Blumen," "In dem Schatten meiner Locken," "Mein Liebster hat zu Tische mich geladen," "Wie lange schon." Strauss: "Du meines

Herzen Krönelein," "Begegnung," "Die Nacht," "Morgen." Bernstein: *I Hate Music! A Cycle of Five Kid Songs*.

In his book *Opera People*, Jacobson called Christa Ludwig "the Earth-Mother of all singers," and the moniker was fitting in every possible way. There was the arresting beauty of the sound itself, from its opulent depths to its radiant heights. There was the reassuring strength of her technique, which allowed her to sing with ease and utter security. There was the intense expressiveness of her singing, wed to a disarming simplicity and directness which set her apart from some of her famous contemporaries. That lack of pretentiousness was a hallmark of her offstage personality as well, for which she was adored by fans and colleagues alike. In short, Christa Ludwig was everything that a professional singer should be, and the fact that she was able to sing for so long with such excellence is perhaps the highest tribute of all.

It may be time to refer to Christa Ludwig's singing in past tense, but (as of this writing) Christa Ludwig the human being is still very much with us, and this two-disk DVD has been released in honor of her eightieth birthday. What a splendid birthday gift this is, for it allows us to enjoy a generous representation of Ludwig's mastery of the art song, two fleeting glimpses of her performing opera, and most delightfully of all, at work as a master class clinician. The release is enhanced by illuminating program notes which include the text of a 2007 interview conducted by journalist Renate Burtcher that further reveals Ludwig's intelligence and grace.

If there is anything disappointing about this release, it is the rather underwhelming attention given to Ludwig's operatic career, which spanned nearly fifty years and encompassed all of the major companies of the world and most of the century's most important conductors and singers. Unfortunately, the video legacy of Ludwig on the opera stage is ridiculously limited for such a spectacular career, and there is not nearly as much to choose from as one might assume or wish. We are treated here to a delightful excerpt from *Falstaff* featuring Ludwig's hearty Mistress Quickly opposite the charismatic Giuseppe Taddei. The picture may be a bit dim, but these two veterans make the screen sizzle. The other operatic excerpt comes not from a live performance, but rather from a film of *Così fan tutte*, and as a momento of Ludwig's Dorabella it is rather irrelevant. If only we were able to view complete onstage performances of Ludwig in her greatest roles: Octavian, the Marschallin, the Dyer's Wife, Dorabella, Kundry, Brangäne, and more.

Fortunately, ample video survives of Ludwig's recital work, and the performances recorded for this release further enhance our appreciation for her mastery of the art song. She is seen here in a complete performance of Schubert's *Die Winterreise*, as well as in assorted songs by Mahler, Wolf, Strauss, and Bernstein, beautifully accompanied at the piano by frequent collaborator Charles Spencer. One minor regret is that these lieder recitals were not recorded before an audience, and it contributes to a slightly "canned" quality to the proceedings. The camera work is fairly undistinguished and frustratingly distant too much of the time in *Die Winterreise*, and one also

wonders whose decision it was to bring up crimson lighting in the background as Ludwig sings Schubert's "Im Abendrot." Those concerns aside, this is a superb document of Ludwig at the very end of her singing career. The voice is rich and still remarkably integrated, and unlike other singers in their twilight, Ludwig resists the urge to slather her performances with interpretive extremes. She was always a singer who trusted the greatness of these songs and who approached her performing with a touching and all-too-rare sense of humility. "We singers must never forget," she wrote in her memoirs, "that we are only the servants of the great minds who created all of the wonderful pieces of music which we enjoy today."


To recount the high points is ultimately an exercise in happy frustration, for so much of this singing is superb and in so many ways. More than one critic has remarked that if there is any way in which Ludwig grew as a singer from the start of her career to its conclusion, it was in her capacity to give herself over more completely in the happy songs she sang. Certainly, she is fully persuasive in the exuberance of Wolf's "Der Gärtner" and in the joyous rising lines of Mahler's "Ich ging mit Lust." There is a smile not only on her face and in her sound, but also encompassing her whole being. It is difficult to understand, let alone articulate, what Ludwig manages to achieve here but it is truly remarkable. She is especially beguiling in Wolf's "In dem Schatten meiner Locken" by captur-

ing the shifting moods of the woman with a playful mix of potency and understatement. Equally impressive is what Ludwig always has been able to do with darker, more restrained songs like "Die Nacht" or "Morgen" by Strauss. The latter receives a performance that may be ever so slightly encumbered by the encroachment of age, but whatever she has lost in breath and evenness of tone (which is not much), she has more than gained back in the kind of depth of understanding that comes only when one has lived a long, sometimes challenging, and ultimately satisfying life, artistically and otherwise. The way in which she sings the word "stumm" over that striking ninth chord in the accompaniment seems to transport her—and us—to another time and place.

As impressive as the aforementioned lieder recital is, many may find her performance of *Die Winterreise* to be even more impressive. Certainly, it is extremely rare to have a woman perform this song cycle, and the liner notes of the disk suggest that Ludwig may be only the third major female singer—after Lotte Lehmann and Elena Gerhardt—to do so. Some might argue that these texts are meant to be expressed by a male, but Ludwig states in the liner notes that these poems speak of the winter journey of a human soul, and not necessarily that of a man—or of a woman, for that matter. Ludwig goes on to say that a woman is able to bring a certain perspective to matters of life, love, and death that are different from that of a man, and that is why she believes so fervently that this song cycle needs to be embraced and performed by both men and women. Certainly, those of us who were privileged to see and hear Ludwig perform this song cycle at the Ravinia

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Festival many years ago could not possibly believe that Ludwig was straying into emotional territory beyond her abilities. The performance was one of astonishing emotional impact and the two minutes of silence that followed "Der Leiermann" was the equivalent of a thousand standing ovations.

The performance captured on this disk is powerful and expressive, although one dearly wishes that an audience had been present to somehow give the proceedings more of a sense of a journey experienced together. Some also may be troubled by the frequent transpositions that Ludwig employs to keep all of these songs in what she refers to as her most natural register where she would be able to deliver the text most expressively. "I wanted to make it as simple as possible," she states in the liner notes, and whatever one might think of that choice and its appropriateness, it seems to have yielded rich artistic results. Interestingly, the changes go in both directions, with seven of the songs transposed down and two of them actually transposed up; the transpositions are limited to a half or whole step.

As for the performance itself, it is vintage Ludwig. Her sound suggests the richness of the cello, especially in those songs that probe the depths of sorrow as well as in those moments when biting bitterness is needed. There is also something haunting when a voice as colorful as Ludwig's is scaled back to a near whisper. The opening to "Der Wegweiser" or the closing phrases of "Der Leiermann" are uttered with a profound, painful sense of bleakness and loss. By and large, this is a performance that is free of artifice and of expressive surprises, save for an unexpectedly slow, soft approach to "Die Post." Otherwise, Ludwig deliv-

ers this cycle with the same sort of straightforward, assured confidence and skill that has informed her career every step of the way.

What is perhaps most treasurable of all on these disks is the opportunity they afford us to see Ludwig in action as a clinician in master classes filmed in Vienna in 1999. She works through operatic repertoire with three young singers who were virtually unknown at the time: mezzo soprano Stella Grigorian, tenor Valerij Serkin, and baritone Marcus Pelz, and they seem to be excited by this opportunity, entirely open to her guidance, but not unduly intimidated by the prospect of sharing the stage with one of the truly legendary singers of the twentieth century. Ludwig has a way of setting exactly the right sort of tone for the proceedings by asserting herself firmly as the person in charge, yet with an inviting sort of warmth and charm. She is not shy about bestowing glowing compliments when they are warranted, particularly when the tenor delivers two performances that require only the

most subtle sort of tweaking and polishing. She is an exacting teacher, and not reluctant to cut off a singer after two or three notes to reassert direction that seems to be followed. This happens especially when she is after more legato singing from Ms. Grigorian as she renders one of Dorabella's arias from *Così fan tutte*. Her singing seems at first to be perfectly legato, but as Ludwig works with the young mezzo we realize that there are all sorts of moments when in fact the melodic line is not legato at all or at least not as legato as it can and should be. Ludwig is also not shy when she asked for a certain dynamic which a singer might deliver only to a point. Again with Ms. Grigorian, Ludwig demands very soft, silken singing in the opening of Carmen's "Seguidilla," and every time the mezzo strays back into louder singing she is stopped in her tracks. What is refreshing is Ludwig's good-natured approach to insisting on only the best that these young singers can deliver.

Much of what Ludwig does is very basic, such as insisting that repeated

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text be sung with some sort of variation. She also asks the singers to perform their arias more mindful of the other characters who would be with them, were it a fully staged performance. This yields handsome rewards with Ms. Grigorian's "Seguidilla" as Ludwig reminds the young mezzo of where Don Jose is at that moment and of the vital importance of luring him in. Ludwig suggests to all three singers that certain moments are best approached as being sung to themselves rather than out to the audience. Above all, the cardinal sin for Ludwig is singing for the sake of lovely sounds. She cares that the singing be beautiful, but not at the expense of expressiveness. "Otherwise," she says at one point, "this just becomes an aria."

Some master class clinicians make a point of keeping everything in the moment and refuse to engage in any reminiscences from their own careers, while others seem to spend an embarrassing amount of time perched on what so easily can become distracting tangents. Ludwig achieves a perfect

sense of balance here by mentioning certain names from her extraordinary career, but only briefly. At the outset of coaching the Dorabella aria, she mentions in passing that she studied this aria with Herbert von Karajan. Ludwig already had the credentials of being one of the finest Dorabellas of all time, but the brief mention of the name Karajan reinforces the fact that she is speaking from a position of extraordinary experience. As she works with Mr. Serkin on an aria from *Werther*, she mentions having sung this opera opposite Franco Corelli, who she says had a voice that was far too heavy to be ideal for the role, but who compensated with a thrilling emotional intensity. One has to appreciate Ludwig's capacity not only to admire those colleagues who were cut from the same sort of artistic fabric as she was, but also her ability to admire those who brought other gifts to the table.

The viewer likely will appreciate the brief spoken comments that adjoin each aria. On one disk these comments from Ludwig summarize both the pres-

ent skills and the likely potential of each of the three young singers. On the other disk, the singers themselves speak with wonderment at the privilege of working with Ludwig and of how difficult it is to sing to your highest abilities under such circumstances. That they sing as well as they do is a tribute to them; that they leave these master classes as even better singers is a tribute to their master teacher, Christa Ludwig.

Chester Biscardi—At the Still Point.

Judith Bettina, soprano; James Goldsworthy, piano. (CRI CD 686; 54:00)

The Gift of Life. Traverso. Companion Piece. Incitation to Desire. Mestiere. Tenzone. At the Still Point.

Readers of this column may recall an enthusiastic recent review of a compact disk titled *Songs and Encores: Recital of American Song*, featuring Judith Bettina and James Goldsworthy. A colorful array of American song composers was represented in what amounted to tantalizing glimpses of their very best work in highly persuasive performances. One of the highlights of that disk was a haunting song called "Guru" by Chester Biscardi, which surely left listeners hungry to hear more, assuming that this was their initial introduction to this composer and his music.

In fact, Chester Biscardi has been an intriguing and gifted voice in contemporary music for the last several decades, and the compact disk at hand commemorates his career as he reaches the age of sixty. Born and raised in Kenosha, Wisconsin (a city which most Americans probably as-

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sociate with auto plants and bratwurst rather than the nuanced world of the art song), Biscardi has enjoyed a career that has taken him across the globe, yielded him awards such as the Prix de Rome, and eventually brought him to the chairmanship of the music department of Sarah Lawrence College. He is probably best known not only for his art songs, but also for his superbly crafted instrumental chamber music and for piano works that seem to make the piano sing in wonderful new ways.

Biscardi has selected works for this disk that span nearly two decades and several genres. Fans of his vocal music will undoubtedly be disappointed that only one of the seven works gathered here is for voice, but that particular piece is a true masterwork. Moreover, the rest of this disk offers a fascinating view of how Biscardi's artistic vision has shifted and grown over the years, and the opportunity to hear his musical voice in these various genres should not be missed. Some of the music here is easily accessible (such as a tango titled "Incitation to Desire") while other pieces like the Tenzone for Two Flutes is more daringly modern. Liner notes give helpful and interesting background information on each and every work.

The vocal work is called *The Gift of Life*, and in fact is a song cycle completed fifteen years ago. [See also the "Music Review" column, pp. 111–112.] The composer explains in the liner notes that he wrote this in the wake of a most satisfying collaboration with Henry Butler for a chamber opera titled *Tight-Rope*. The pleasure of working with characters and plot forever altered the way Biscardi would approach the task of crafting art songs and powerfully shaped the creation of

the song cycle. (Biscardi related in some correspondence that after writing his opera, he found it very difficult to return to the arena of instrumental music, although he eventually did so and has gone on to craft powerful and original instrumental works.)

The song cycle was composed for Bettina and Goldsworthy, who perform it here as they did for the work's premiere in 1993. It begins with an exquisite setting of one of Emily Dickinson's most tender poems, which opens this way:

Mama never forgets her birds,
Though in another tree—
She looks down just as often
And just as tenderly.

Dickinson wrote this in memory of an aunt who had died and likened her departure from this world to a bird flying from one tree to another, yet still looking down on her baby birds with concern and affection. Biscardi's sensitive treatment of this text is breathtakingly beautiful, and it draws us inexorably into the rest of this work and exploration of, in Biscardi's words, "birth, life, memory, loss, death, and finally, love." The middle portion of the work is based on a text from Denise Levertov's *Life in the Forest*, a woman's thoughtful reflection on her own mother who seems about to slip away from her. This text is less poetic, at least in the conventional sense of the word, which makes it all the more challenging to set to music, but Biscardi responds beautifully with music that gently breathes life into the text without obscuring it. The third and final portion of the text is from Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and speaks powerfully and persuasively of the finality of death and of our own eventual oblivion, but also of the importance of

love as the last and, in fact, only bridge between life and death. Here, as throughout the piece, Biscardi writes with a striking mix of sparseness and warmth, and the text is treated with such loving care. Judith Bettina sings beautifully and Jeff Goldsworthy offers sensitive accompaniment at every turn.

So yet again, we are left tantalized by the songs of Chester Biscardi and hungry to hear more. May our wait be brief.

Russell Oberlin Sings Handel Arias.

Russell Oberlin, countertenor. Baroque Chamber Orchestra; Thomas Dunn, conductor. (Deutsche Grammophon 477 6541; 47:43)

"But who may abide," "How beautiful are the feet" (*Messiah*); "Their land brought forth frogs," "Thou shalt bring them in" (*Israel in Egypt*); "Ah dolce nome!" (*Muzio Scaevola*); "Vivi, tiranno!" "Dove sei, amato bene" (*Rodelinda*); "Ombra cara," (*Radamisto*).

Both of the aforementioned recordings commemorate landmark birthdays. So does Deutsche Grammophon's release on compact disk of this landmark recording of Handel arias sung by countertenor Russell Oberlin. It is the singer's eightieth birthday which prompts this particular release, and it is long overdue.

To some extent, Oberlin's reputation as one of the twentieth century's most important singers has been ill-served by the emergence of David Daniels, a countertenor who took the world by storm with a voice and style that were much more powerful and muscular. Many of the laudatory reviews of Daniels's singing drew a sharp contrast between his singing (so of-


ten deemed much more “masculine”) and that of his two most famous modern-day predecessors, Alfred Deller and Russell Oberlin. According to the more aggressively and carelessly written reviews, Deller and Oberlin were but pale, pastel precursors to the “real thing,” which came with their gifted successor’s dramatic emergence in the 1990s. In fact, such accounts do a disservice to both generations. David Daniels is a countertenor with a truly uncommon instrument, but he is also a superlative musician capable of quite sensitive singing. Although Daniels’s predecessors may not have possessed his sheer vocal heft, Oberlin especially was capable of shooting off very exciting vocal fireworks of his own.

This wonderful collection of Handel arias showcases Oberlin’s many strengths, but especially his exceptional gift for sculpting lyric lines with grace and nuance. “Dove sei, amato bene” from *Rodelinda* is probably the high point of this release. The oboe-like timbre of Oberlin’s voice gives this aria a melting beauty that one scarcely can imagine being bettered, and these wide-ranging melodic phrases sound almost simple, which is a truly astounding feat. At the other end of the expressive spectrum is “Their land brought forth frogs” from *Israel in Egypt*, which is exactly the sort of energetic aria where one might assume that the heftier sound of Daniels would be very much missed. Actually, Oberlin brings his own kind of intensity to this aria and demon-

strates how excitement is never borne of sheer amplitude as much as it is by musical and authentic expressivity.

Ultimately, this release reminds all of us of something that Oberlin and Daniels have known all along, and which they stated unequivocally in a memorable dual interview for *Opera News* several years ago. The truth is that countertenors should no more come in one size than any other type of singer, and that both of these fine singers have enriched the world of music immeasurably. How gratifying to have this release available to the public again as a testament to a truly superb singer.

Gregory Berg is an Assistant Professor of Music at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where he teaches private voice. He is Fine Arts Director for local public radio station WGTD FM 91.1, for which he hosts a daily classical music program, “The Music Potpourri,” and a daily interview program called “The Morning Show.” A church organist since the age of eight, he serves Holy Communion Lutheran Church as Minister of Music. He graduated from Luther College (Decorah, Iowa) in 1982 and earned his master’s degree in vocal performance from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. During his undergraduate and graduate years, he earned four first-place finishes in state and regional NATS competitions; he also won first place in the District Metropolitan Opera Auditions and was an apprentice with the prestigious Lyric Opera Center for American Artists in Chicago. Since moving to southeastern Wisconsin, Berg has been an active soloist with area orchestras and wind ensembles. He is also a composer of church music with two contemporary liturgies and three commissioned hymns to his credit.



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