



AUDIO SOCIETY OF ATLANTA

JUNE 2011

Mahler: *Rückert-Lieder*, Brahms, Schubert, Sibelius

Julia Morgan, mezzo; Amanda Johnston, piano; with Jody Davenport, viola, in Brahms' *Zwei Lieder*

MSR Classics MS1402

Canadian mezzo-soprano Julia Morgan, with the close collaboration of pianist Amanda Johnston, gives deeply insightful, intriguing performances of some of the great German *lieder* (art-songs) by Brahms, Schubert, Sibelius, and Mahler. Her sheer vocal power may not qualify her in the class of some of the operatic aircraft carriers we sometimes hear assaying this repertoire, but her voice has other qualities that are more appropriate to the nuances we find in *lieder*, including a velvet smoothness and a flawless way of handling a musical line that serves these songs very well.

Most important, she has the requisite intelligence to bring out the subtleties in poetic texts in which meaning and emotion are not always perfectly straightforward or transparent. Most often this is due to the sense of the lyric itself, be it the submerged longing of a secret love or a heart not yet willing to reveal itself, as in Schubert's setting of Johann Mayrhofer's *Abendstern* (Evening Star): "Why do you linger alone in the sky, / Oh, beautiful star? And you are so gentle, / Why does your brothers' sparkling swarm / Distance itself from your image?" Or, take the first of Gustav Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder* based on songs of Friedrich Rückert: "Look not into my songs! / I cast my eyes downwards, / As if caught in the midst of a wicked deed. / I cannot even trust myself / To watch them grow. / Your curiosity is pure betrayal!"

Brahms' *Gestillte Sehnsucht* (Stilled Longing), to another Rückert text, provides a further example: "When no more on the eternally distant stars / Does my longing linger; / Then the wind and the little birds / Whisper away my life and my longing." In other songs, the emotion is more direct and personal, as in Jean Sibelius' setting of a poem by Richard Dehmel: "The moon is hidden by the garden's gate, / Its light flows over the lake. / The willows stand so silently, / My neck burrows into the moist clover. / Never before have I loved you so!" And how effectively Morgan drops her voice to its lower register in the final line of Schubert's Mayrhofer song *Auf der Donau* (On the Danube): "In the small boat we become anxious; / Waves, like time, threaten impending doom."

Morgan gives the best account of herself in some of the best *lieder* on this program, such as Mahler's setting of Rückert's *Um Mitternacht* (At Midnight), truly a dark night of the soul in which the poem ends on a note of acceptance: "Lord! Over death and life / You keep watch / At midnight!" And in the incomparable *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (I am lost to the world) she exhibits marvelous breath control and shows her keen poetic insight in a song in which the emotion runs on past bar line and printed text, to be continued by Johnston's eloquent pianism: "I am dead to the world's tumult, / And I rest in a peaceful realm! / I live alone in my heaven, / In my love and in my songs!"

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