

## CD REVIEW 95

### VERONIQUE GENS

BERLIOZ Herminie

BERLIOZ Les Nuits d'été

RAVEL Shéhérazade

Veronique Gens, Orchestre National des Pays de la

Loire, John Axelrod,

Ondine ODE 1200-2

(65' 55")



Veronique Gens is a truly superb French soprano, especially magnificent in Baroque music and now, with this amazing CD, French vocal music. She was born in Orleans and among her teachers was William Christie.

Her dedication to Mozart has led her to say that if you can sing Mozart your voice is in good shape. But she is not confined to any period of music. She has sung Eva in *The Mastersingers*, Agathe in Weber's *Die Freischutz* and in Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmelites*.

Her other roles are in Debussy's disappointing opera *Pelleas and Melisande*, one French composer called it a cure for insomnia, as well as operas by Gluck, two by Richard Strauss, Verdi's *Falstaff*, Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, Lully and Monteverdi, six operas by Handel as well as *Messiah* and seven operas by Mozart. Among her recordings are works by Boismortier, Campra, Scarlatti, Roussel and Bach's B minor Mass.

Her voice is varied from the lightness of Mozart to the drama of Wagner. And what I also admire about her is her diction and its clarity.

What makes the disc so remarkable is that, although I am not enamoured with the Berlioz pieces, apart from the first song in *Les Nuits d'été* called *Villanelle*, the performances makes one want to listen. Nonetheless music has to be considered on two plains – the music itself and the performance.

The performances are excellent and I cannot perceive that they will ever be bettered.

The cantata *Herminie* is a setting of words by Viellarde (1778-1862).

Berlioz, who could be truculent and difficult, was upset that he had not won the Prix de Rome with *La Mort d'Orphee* because he had tried to be modern.

Now he took another negative subject. The Queen of Antioch hides her identity in Clorinda's armour and leaves Jerusalem to find Tancredi whom she loves and, in so doing, she betrays her own people. Some of the music in this piece predicts the troubling and sometimes tedious *Symphonie Fantastique*.

The music for *Herminie* does not lend itself to the drama of the text. There is no cohesion between the four movements. It is tame music yet it has its moments and Gens is quite superb, despite the obvious limitations of the music.

There is a better clarity in *Les Nuits d'été* although the six songs vary in quality. *Villanelle* is so good that the other five songs are an anti-climax. But the performances hold the attention with a magnetic force.

This CD is worth its price for the Ravel. *Shéhérazade* is his masterpiece and I will say it again ... *Shéhérazade* is his masterpiece. Ravel said that his *Bolero* was rubbish, and he should know, and

many find his Spanish music weak and poor. Some of his piano music is merely atmospheric, as it is with Debussy, but it is challenging for any pianist. The concertos are first class; Daphnis and Chloe is another great work proving his unquestionable orchestral skills and the chamber music is choice.

Shéhérazade is so different from the Berlioz. It was composed about 1903. He was about 28 at the time and still studying the Arabian Nights and the culture of the Slav nations. The music is exotic and the harmonies are as gorgeous and luscious as any could be.

The words are by Tristan Klingsor (1874-1966). The first song, Asia, speaks of the fascination of both this continent and its inhabitants. There are turbans and dark skinned people with white teeth and men with long white beards. The music of Asia is noted for its dancing rhythms. There are crooked merchants and the executions and beheading of villains.

Gens captures all these scenes with consummate ease.

The second song, The Enchanted Flute, has its sorrow and happiness and states how the music of the flute is often like a kiss upon the cheek.

The final song is more suited to a male voice as it is a song of love to a girl whose eyes are soft and who has a feminine and weary gait.

The seductiveness and various moods are captured in this glorious voice and John Axelrod and the orchestra are also very fine and the sound is clear and evocative.

It is a must for all who admire a really great voice ... and the bonus is the Ravel .

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