



Portrait Maureen Forrester

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I first became acquainted with the artistry of Maureen Forrester (1930-2010) from a 2 CD set issued by Vanguard Classics (SVC-64/65). It featured the singer in music by Bach and Handel with the Zagreb Soloists under Antonio Janigro. One particular work immediately won me over, Bach's Cantata BWV 54 *Widerstehe doch der Sünde*, and it's something I've returned to often. The contralto voice has suffered something of a decline since the war, and has acquired a reputation in some quarters as sounding plummy and matronly. Whilst the profile of Kathleen Ferrier has remained high, Maureen Forrester's popularity has tended to be restricted to specialists. One reason was that, like Ferrier, she felt more comfortable in the concert hall rather than on the operatic stage. Her career spanned forty years and, throughout, her technique remained largely unimpaired. Maybe there was a slight loss in brilliance of tone towards the end, but her instinctive phrasing, well-controlled vibrato and flawless intonation withstood the test of time.

These recordings are here making their first outing on CD, and they come via the Berlin RIAS studios, which were located at the time in the city's American sector. They were taped between 1955 and 1963. Their value lies in the fact that they explore lieder with piano accompaniment, an area under-represented in Forrester's discography. The selection is wide-ranging, featuring composers from Johann Wolfgang Franck and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach to Samuel Barber and Benjamin Britten. Forrester also travels some less trodden paths. For instance, in the Schubert selection, she avoids the more popular songs, even performing one or two that I'd never heard before. Similarly with the Schumann, she opts for the less well-known late lieder. The earliest recitals were set down in 1955, and here her accompanist was Michael Raucheisen. In 1958 when she returned to the RIAS Studio, Raucheisen had by this time retired, so Felix Schröder partnered her, apparently standing in at the last minute for Aribert Reimann. In the two final sessions in March 1960 and September 1963, she is accompanied by Hertha Klust, who achieved some fame for her collaborations with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

There's much here to enchant, so I thought I would highlight some of the gems that have attracted me. I'm pleased that we have her singing the two C.P.E. Bach songs. *Jesus in Gethsemane* is a particular favourite of mine, and rarely performed. I first got to know it in an enthralling account by Gérard Souzay on Testament (SBT 1315). Her *Wesendonck Lieder* have to be one of the finest renditions I've heard. From the very beginning, *Der Engel* is delivered with matchless beauty, Forrester's rich warm, velvety tone deeply compelling. *Träume* is ardent and delicately shaded. Brahms' *Gypsy Songs* Op. 103 (originally for vocal quartet), of which eight have been chosen,

are spirited and rhythmically buoyant, benefiting from the lusty, involved contribution of Hertha Klust. The pair breathe new life and affection into these genial miniatures. Forrester projects Britten's *A Charm of Lullabies*, Op. 41 with clarity and definition, and not only infuses the songs with a sense of drama but is fully responsive to the nuances that lie therein. The anger depicted in the fourth song *Quiet, sleep! Or I will make Erinys whip thee with a snake!* contrasts strongly with the soothing qualities of *The Nurse's Song* which ends the cycle.

Barber's *Mélodies passagères* were written in the early 1950s for Pierre Bernac and Francis Poulenc. They are settings of poems in French by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and are the composer's homage to French *mélodie*, with permeating hints of Debussy and Fauré. I've never heard them before, but Forrester's subtle, idiomatic performances are a winning element. Klust's sensitive, colourfully shaded accompaniments add further to the allure. The two Poulenc cycles further reinforce the impression that the singer is securely housed in her comfort zone in this repertoire.

It was Bruno Walter who introduced Forrester to Gustav Mahler's vocal oeuvre, and he wanted to record the Austrian composer's music with her. As both artists were hide-bound to different recording companies, Forrester had just signed a three year contract with RCA, and Walter was a CBS artist, the project remained unfulfilled. She did however record *Das Lied von der Erde* with Reiner in Chicago (RCA), *Kindertotenlieder* with Munch in Boston (RCA) and *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* with Prohaska in Vienna (Vanguard). Nevertheless, we have Forrester here in *Five Songs* by Friedrich Rückert. She has a natural affinity for Mahler's sound-world, her bronzed tone ideally suited to this music. She can also be heard with Walter in *Symphony No. 2 Resurrection* (review review) and in the same work with Slatkin.

This is an outstanding production, and certainly fills a lacuna in the artist's discography. All the recordings have been well-preserved and the sound throughout is consistent, vibrant and immediate. I must commend Audite on their excellent annotations in German and English. Written by Heribert Henrich and translated by David Babcock, they provide not only a detailed biographical portrait of the artist, but interesting background as to the genesis of the recordings. This splendid 3 CD set would grace any vocal collection.