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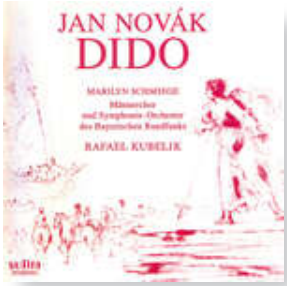

Jan Novak: Dido - Mimus Magicus

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American Record Guide (Charles H. Parsons - 2001.09.01)

The Czech composer Jan Novak (1921-84) was deeply interested in Latin literature and poetry. For him Latin was still a living language, and he even wrote poetry and prose in Latin. In 1983 he founded the Latin music festival Ludi Latini. Born in Moravia, Novak studied in America with Martinu and Copland. In 1948 he returned to Moravia, but the political turmoil and violence of the "Prague Spring" in 1968 forced the composer and his family to flee Czechoslovakia, moving to Denmark, then Italy, and finally Germany. As an ex-patriot Czech and a Latin humanist Novak found little acceptance. His catalog of compositions lists settings of many of the great traditional Latin masters: Catullus, Virgil, Horace, Tibullus, Seneca, Cicero, and Caesar. Perhaps the oddest of his compositions is a setting of recipes from the "Cook Book" of Apicius! From the play Dulcitius by Germany's first poetess Hrotsvitha von Gandersheim, Novak constructed a comic opera. Modern Latin texts included ones by Josef Eberle and Harry C Schnur . To teach children to enjoy Latin Novak even composed music for children with Latin texts.

Novak's cantata Dido gets its text from the fourth book of The Aeneid of Virgil. The cantata covers much the same territory as Henry Purcell's opera Dido and Aeneas. It was first performed in 1967 in Brno. A mezzo-soprano (voce media) portrays Dido as a narrator (recitans) tells the tale with commentary by a men's chorus (here the Choro virorum symphoniacisque stationis radiophonicae Bavaricae adstrepentibus). The work bears some resemblance to Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex, with a similar use of a men's chorus and a major role for mezzo-soprano. Novak's narrator plays a much more important role than Stravinsky's. The two works also have a similarity of propulsive rhythms, but in general Novak's music is much more romantic sounding, less detached, less acerbic.

This 1982 performance is a fine one, with Kubelik in firm command, driving the work to its dramatic conclusion. Schmiege may not have the most attractive voice, but she sings most musically, with a warmth and breadth of vocal power combined with dramatic insight. Fiedler was the first to perform the sprechstimme role of Moses in Schoenberg's Moses and Aaron (1954) and he performs here with immense dignity and expression.

The 13-minute Mimus Magicus (1969) is a setting of portions of Virgil's eighth eclogue, Bucolica. Like Dido it deals with love, but instead of seeking death as a remedy for love, the heroine here tries to win back her unfaithful lover through the use of magic spells. Here the musical forces are much reduced, requiring only a soprano soloist (voce acuta), a flute (calamo traverso), and a piano (clavibus pulsatis). Novak does less with these lesser forces, but it isn't quite fair to judge the work on the basis of this inadequate 1986 performance. Soprano (voce acuta) Kurokouchi should be voce acerba! Pitches are woefully misplaced, particular in the

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higher range, and an acidic quality colors the entire voice. Enjoy the Dido, but this is "Minimus Magicus".

A libretto in Latin, English, and German is included. Even the program notes and performance-recording credits are in Latin!

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