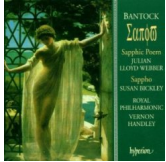


Granville Bantock – Sappho · Sapphic Poem (1997)

Written by bluesever

Wednesday, 11 May 2011 18:54 - Last Updated Sunday, 18 August 2013 08:09

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1. *Sappho: Prelude* 2. *Sappho: Hymn To Aphrodite* 3. *Sappho: 'I Loved Thee Once, Atthis, Long Ago'* 4. *Sappho: Evening Song* [play](#) 5. *Sappho: 'Stand Face To Face, Friend'* 6. *Sappho: 'The Moon Has Set'* 7. *Sappho: 'Peer Of Gods He Seems'* 8. *Sappho: 'In A Dream, I Spake'* [play](#) 9. *Sappho: Bridal Song* 10. *Sappho: 'Muse Of The Golden Throne'* 11. *Sapphic Poem*
Susan Bickley – mezzo-soprano Julian Lloyd Webber - cello Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Vernon Handley - conductor

Composed between 1900 and 1907, Sappho is a cycle of nine songs for mezzo-soprano and orchestra with a vivid symphonic prologue. One could describe the score as a celebration of Eros, by turns radiant and gloomy, that never quite subverts the cozy decorum of the Edwardian parlor--or, if one prefers, as a celebration of the added-sixth chord. Bantock's musical language owes a lot to the second acts of Tristan and Parsifal; it has points of contact with early Scriabin, Strauss, and Puccini; and every now and then it hints at Rimsky's oriental splendor. But the cycle as a whole is tightly crafted, and the individual songs are set like gems. Bantock knew his stuff. It's hard to imagine the music receiving a finer performance than it gets here. A large share of the credit goes to Handley, a superb conductor all but unknown in this country and sadly underappreciated in his own, who coaxes radiant work from the Royal Philharmonic and partners mezzo Susan Bickley with exquisite aplomb. Bickley, who might just become the next Janet Baker, holds up her end heroically, delivering the taxing solo part with compelling expressiveness. Her voice sounds a little overmiked, carrying over Bantock's heaving textures in a way that would never happen in the concert hall; aside from that, Hyperion's sonics are spectacular. The RPO's seating is crystal clear: violins split left and right, cellos inside the firsts and violas inside the seconds, basses on the far right, winds center, horns and harp back left, and heavy brass and percussion--including a stunningly well-registered bass drum--back right. Solo instruments are beautifully imaged, and the string, wind, and brass tone is glorious. Kudos to engineer Tony Faulkner. The filler, Bantock's lightly scored Sapphic Poem for cello and orchestra, fails to make much of an impression--though whether the fault lies with the composer, or the anemic playing of soloist Julian Lloyd Webber, is hard to say. --Ted Libbey

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Ancient Greece was one of Granville Bantock's passions, as evidenced by his Pagan and Cyprian Goddess symphonies. Here, he sets the poems of Sappho to music. This is not an easy task since her poems exist in fragments. The text was fashioned by Bantock's wife, Helena, and is a remarkable achievement. This song cycle is beautifully conceived and is characterized by Bantock's sensitive and colorful orchestral writing. Vernon Handley and the Royal Philharmonic turn in an excellent performance. The song cycle begins with a prelude that presents the themes of the first songs and sets the stage for what is to follow. The songs require a dramatic reading and Susan Bickley is up to the challenge: they require a range of emotion from ecstatic to sad. The Bridal Song is a particularly charming piece, less elegiac in tone than the other songs, and reminds us that many of Sappho's poems were written to celebrate weddings. The Sapphic Poem for cello and orchestra is a magnificent showpiece for the solo instrument. Bantock quoted a fragment of Sappho at the beginning of the score: "and this I feel in myself." The quote sets the tone of the work - introspective, reflective and dramatic. Here, the cello does the soul searching that the voice does in the song cycle. The orchestration includes no heavy brass so the cello can sing out, and it does to great effect. Julian Lloyd Webber is an ideal soloist. This is a journey to an exotic and long-forgotten time and place that Bantock brings life to with his incomparable music. ---D.A. Wend

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