

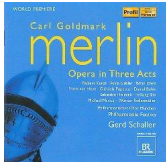
## Goldmark - Merlin (2009)

Written by bluesever

Monday, 21 January 2019 14:59 -

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1. Act I 2. Act II 3. Act III Robert Künzli (Merlin) Anna Gabler (Viviane) Brian Davis (Lancelot) Daniel Behle (Modred) Gabriela Popescu (Morgana) Frank van Hove (The Demon) Sebastian Holecek (Artus) In-Sung Sim (Glendower) Michael Mantaj (Gawein) Werner Rollenmüller (Bedwyr) Munich Philharmonic Choir Philharmonie Festiva-Orchester München Gerd Schaller - conductor

Hungarian composer Carl Goldmark (1830 – 1915) was something of a self-taught renaissance man. In addition to composition, he studied languages, philosophy, literature, and sciences, and continued on the path of learning throughout his life. By age 45, he had achieved worldwide fame for his first opera, *Die Königen von Saba* and enjoyed friendships with many of the most important musical figures in Europe, including Johannes Brahms. Yet, for all his success, very little of his music retains a place in the modern repertoire, and *Merlin* is only the second of his six operas to be commercially recorded.

After the popular success of *Die Königen von Saba* in 1875, it was eleven years before his next complete opera, *Merlin*, was produced. Each of his four succeeding operas was also slow to appear, indicating that Goldmark took great care in the compositional process, lingering lovingly over orchestral coloring and choosing his vocal effects carefully. Like many composers active during the late 1800's, Goldmark's music has been tagged as betraying Wagnerian influence. While traces of the great German master's style show up in *Merlin* from time to time, it would be difficult to argue that Goldmark was a mere imitator. In fact, his musical style is complex and occasionally acts as a prism, exhibiting the influence of a wide variety of Germanic forebears, including Weber, Beethoven, Meyerbeer, and Mendelssohn. The angularity and instrumental quality of Weber's vocal lines can be heard throughout *Merlin*, as can Beethoven's style of concerted vocal lines at climactic moments. There is also a strong 'folk-tune' element. Nevertheless, despite the many influences, Goldmark was in his way, a maverick, and the overall flavor of his style is unique, if somewhat diffuse and ever evolving.

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The conductor of the present recording, Gerd Schaller, seems to have been one of the driving forces behind the revival of Merlin, judging from his booklet notes on the piece and his pictures on the reverse of both the CD case and booklet. His dedication to the opera comes through in his conducting, which is urgent and impassioned, as well as strongly supportive of the singers. Recorded in Bad Kissingen in May, 2009, his orchestra, the Philharmonie Festiva sounds a bit ragged at times, but more or less have the measure of the work. The overall quality of the music seems to improve as the opera progresses – Goldmark seems to 'settle' into an impressive vein of inspiration – and so too does the orchestral performance. By the climax of the second act, they seem to be firing on all cylinders, with some impressive playing during the confrontation between Merlin and Viviane at the end of Act 2.

The Philharmonischer Chor München cannot be faulted for their commitment in contributing to an extremely difficult score. The women in particular, shine in their repeated ascents to high C as well as folk-like contributions to several key scenes with the two protagonists. The plot concerns the wizard Merlin and his seduction by Viviane as instigated by a 'Demon'. Once in love, Merlin loses his powers of perception, and King Arthur is placed at risk before his enemies, the Saxons. Merlin eventually manages to save Arthur, but only by forfeiting his soul to the Demon. In the end though, Viviane redeems him by committing suicide in the name of true love. The libretto, by Siegfried Lipiner, is a straightforward tale of honor and love gained and lost.

It seems strange to think of Merlin – the wise old sage – as a tenor, and yet here, he is also the romantic lead. He is portrayed by tenor Robert Künzli in a committed performance of a challenging role. While much of the part stays low, there are occasional forays into a higher tessitura that require a voice nearing heldentenor proportions. Künzli copes admirably, and produces some excellent singing combined with rare moments of unsteadiness. What he lacks is a truly distinctive vocal profile – a problem endemic to the entire cast. This is most damaging in the casting of the Viviane – soprano Anna Gabler – who sounds young, and perhaps inexperienced. While her basic tone is attractive (somewhat reminiscent of Karita Mattila) she has significant trouble in the higher reaches of her demanding role. Goldmark has given his 'heroine' some stunningly climactic music in which the voice must bloom with strength and tonal allure (think Richard Strauss). Gabler does her best and gets through without any major problems, but the music cries out for a firm command of the vocal line and a fearless attack on high. The only other female cast member is mezzo-soprano Gabriela Popescu, who brings a fruity, Erda-like voluptuousness to the brief role of Morgana. Baritone Brian Davis makes the most of his role as Lancelot – here reduced to a one-dimensional turn as Arthur's supportive second-in-command. But it is bass-baritone Frank von Hove who contributes the most vivid characterization as the Demon. His singing throughout is firm, incisive, and imposingly sinister. Only he, among the cast, seems capable of singing beyond the confines of the difficult score in order to create a fully three-dimensional character. The remainder of the cast fill their roles

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adequately.

Profil Hänssler is to be commended for recording this rarity and making it available to the public. Certainly, this three-disc set is strongly recommended to anyone interested in the lesser-known byways of German Romantic opera. The performance preserved here does plenty of justice to an interesting score and goes some distance toward educating us about the little-heard compositional voice of Carl Goldmark. His fascinatingly detailed score, with its vivid instrumental effects, is the best reason for acquiring this recording. In these times of budget cuts and scaling back of recording projects, it is satisfying to know that operatic rarities such as Merlin can still be performed and recorded with such integrity and professionalism. ---David Laviska, musicalcriticism.com

Karl Goldmark's 1886 opera Merlin can best be summed up as Wagnerian. In addition to the influence of Wagner, there are instances of an almost Mendelssohnian elegance and delicacy, as well as moments of a hale-and-hearty Slavic character. But it's Wagner's fingerprints that are virtually everywhere: in the text setting, the character of the musical gestures, the harmonies, the orchestration, the epic subject, the emotional intensity, the portentous tone, and the length. The difficulty is that Wagner's genius for memorable melody, astute characterization, musical and dramatic momentum, harmonic inventiveness, control of large musical forms, (and, yes), economy, is missing. Almost the whole of the opera, in fact, sounds like it might have been made up of scraps of music gathered from Wagner's cutting room floor. There's nothing wrong with Merlin -- Goldmark's craft and instincts are never in doubt, the Act Two love duet is lovely, and there are countless little felicities that grab the listener's attention -- but it is simply not touched by the magical spark of inspiration that made it possible for Wagner to hold audiences rapt for hours. Nonetheless, a performance of this quality, of a competent but less than stellar work, is a welcome addition to the catalog, as documentation of the pervasiveness of Wagner's hold over the imagination of so many of his contemporaries and of the generation that immediately followed him. Immense care has obviously gone into the details of this recording. Gerd Schaller leads Philharmonie Festiva and Philharmonischer Chor München in a committed and polished reading of the score. The cast is large, and although none of the soloists are internationally well-known, the singers have pleasing voices and are fully competent, and they make as strong a case as possible for the work. Profil's sound is clean and clear, with a good sense of presence, but some singers sound like they are miked a little too closely. ---Stephen Eddins, AllMusic Review

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