

Barber - Knoxville Summer of 1915, Dover Beach, Hermit Songs, Andromache's Farewell (1992)

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 25 May 2017 14:22 -

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1. *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, for high voice & orchestra (rev. for voice & chamber orchestra), Op. 24 2. *Dover Beach*, for baritone (or mezzo-soprano) & string quartet, Op. 3 Hermit Songs, for voice & piano, Op. 29

3. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: I. *At Saint Patrick's Purgatory* 4. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: II. *Church Bell At Night* 5. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: III. *St. Ita's Vision* 6. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: IV. *The Heavenly Banquet* 7. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: V. *The Crucifixion* 8. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: VI. *Sea-snatch* 9. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: VII. *Promiscuity* 10. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: VIII. *The Monk And His Cat* 11. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: IX. *The Praises of God* 12. *Hermit Songs*, Op. 29: X. *The Desire For Hermitage* 13. *Andromache's Farewell*, for soprano & orchestra, Op. 39

Claus Adam (cello) Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (baritone) [2] Earl Carlyss (violin) Eleanor Steber (soprano) [1] Leontyne Price (soprano) [3-12] Martina Arroyo (soprano) [13] Raphael Hillyer (viola) Samuel Barber (piano)

This exploration of the vocal dimension of Barber's music has been in the Sony catalogue for a decade - quite a survivor!

As Robert Cushman says in his booklet notes, Barber came from a family in which the vocal art was prominent. His aunt was the mezzo Louise Homer (1871-1947). Fischer-Dieskau is a mite mournful but Arnold's *Dover Beach* is admittedly hardly a bright subject. It would be welcome if some company would record Maurice Johnstone's setting for baritone and orchestra. Has anyone else set the poem?

The Steber *Knoxville* is a pioneering classic but I prefer Dawn Upshaw's Teldec version. It is a work that easily worms its way into your affections - an operatic scena really and of tellingly

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balanced emotional symmetry. Leontyne Price and the composer premiered the Hermit Songs in 1953 and made this recording a year later. These are well worth hearing and will appeal if you have taken to Leo Smit's Dickinson songs or Finzi's Hardy or the songs of Herbert Howells. Price is very clear and I defy you not to be won over in The Monk and his Cat which lilts along with a Caribbean smile. The settings are of Irish texts from the 8th to 13th centuries as translated and adapted by Auden, Chester Kallman, Howard Mumford Jones and Sean O'Faolain.

After such intimacy the hot up-blast of the orchestra in the scena Andromache's Farewell comes as a voltage jolt to the listener. There is an asperity and astringency about the music in which Barber quarter opens the door to dissonance. Arroyo is in fully blooming operatic voice and there can be no doubting that this is music for a grand auditorium. Andromache already bereft of her husband, Hector (her parting from Hector is charted by Bliss in Morning Heroes). Here she bids farewell to her son Astyanax who is to be executed by the Greeks. The music has that same tenderness, that same turbulence and ambition that is to be heard in Barber's own Antony and Cleopatra and Walton's Troilus and Cressida. Did Barber ever contemplate setting Euripides Trojan Women - a subject that was set by Cecil Gray - another of the great unknowns. A pity that the engineers pull back on the controls at 9.13 just as Arroyo reaches a glorious climax. Still these are all analogue AAD originals and tape saturation had to be managed. You have to hear this: Schippers with all his considerable operatic cunning and the NYPO at his bidding make a great collaboration.

The playing time is short, regrettably. Interpretive values are high and Barber enthusiasts must have this. Sadly no texts are provided although all singer enunciate with care without being mannered.

A disc made memorable by Arroyo and Steber and by Price's faithful clarity, restraint and grip on the intimacy of her songs. ---Rob Barnett, musicweb-international.com

This is an indispensable issue for anyone who values Barber as a composer. I tend to think of him as among the second rank of American composers, after Copland, Roy Harris, Gershwin and one or two others, but that's no disgrace. None of them wrote anything quite as beautiful as "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," and here it receives a performance by the artist who commissioned the piece, Eleanor Steber, when her voice was probably at its peak. The 1950

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recording has plenty of presence, and her phrasing and her attack on the difficult high writing are something to hear. Compare her in this music with a very fine singer like Dawn Upshaw and you realize that Steber was a very great singer indeed -- the best American soprano between Ponselle and Leontyne Price. And speaking of Price, here she is accompanied by Barber in 1954, in his charming "Hermit Songs" -- miniatures really, based on translations of medieval Irish poetry. This is Price who by the end of that decade would be the premiere Verdi soprano of her time. Here the voice is light, pure, and yet, one senses, with plenty in reserve. Another distinguished American soprano, Martina Arroyo, gives an impassioned account of the dramatic scena "Andromache's Farewell," based on a scene from a play by Euripides in which Andromache, the widow of Hector, addresses her son who will soon be killed by the Greeks. It's the most conservative music on this disc, and Arroyo brings great force and tenderness to it. Arroyo pursued her career in Price's shadow, but she deserves mention in the same breath. (Her Leonora in a 1970 recording of Verdi's "Forza" is every bit as good as Price's recording of the role with Levine).

Finally, there's a remarkable setting of "Dover Beach," compellingly sung by Fischer-Dieskau in impeccable German-accented English in a 1967 recording when F-D's voice was in great condition. It's a setting for voice and string quartet (here the Juilliard Quartet) and Matthew Arnold's uneven-lengthed lines are set in an almost melismatic manner, as striking in its way as the more direct lyricism of the setting of Agee's prose in "Knoxville." The Juilliard Quartet play beautifully, and Fischer-Dieskau, recorded a little more closely than ideal, sings with great beauty and feeling. So . . . not just lovers of Barber but lovers of great singing and great voices should look out for this. --- Stanley Crowe, amazon.ca

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