

Poulenc - Dialogues des Carmelites (de Billy) [2012]

Written by bluesever

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Disc 1 1 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 1: Ou Est Blanche? 2 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 1: Les Soldats Surviennent A Temps 3 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 1: Blanche, Votre Frere Aviat Grand'Hate De Vous Revoir 4 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 1: Son Imagination VA Toujours D'Un Extreme A L'Autre 5 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 1: Je Vois Qu'Il N'Y A Heureusement Rien De Grave 6 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 1: Mon Enfant Cherie 7 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 2: Prelude 8 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 2: N'Allez Pas Croire Que Ce Fauteuil 9 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 2: Je Vous Que Les Severites De Notre Regle 10 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 2: Ma Fille, Les Bonnes Gens Se Demandent 11 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 2: Vous Pleurez? 12 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 3: Prelude 13 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 3: Encore Ces Maudites Feves! 14 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 3: Vous N'avez Pas Honte De Parler Ainsi 15 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 3: Oh! Soeur Blanche 16 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 4: Prelude 17 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 4: Ayez La Bonte De Relever Ce Coussin 18 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 4: Je Trouve Que Blanche De La Force Tarde Beaucoup 19 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 4: Relevez-Vous, Ma Fille 20 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 4: Dieu Se Glorifie Dans Ses Saints 21 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 4: Monsieur Javelinot, Je Vous Prie De Me Donner 22 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 4: Mere Marie De L'Incarnation! 23 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act I Scene 4: La Reverende Mere Veut Que Vous Approchiez 24 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 1: Qui Lazarum Resuscitasti A Monumento Foetidum 25 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene I: Que Faites-Vous? 26 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II: Interlude: Soeur Blanche, Je Trouve Notre Croix 27 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II: Interlude: Pensez A La Mort De Notre Chere Mere
Disc 2

1 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 2: Mes Cheres Filles 2 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 2: Mes Soeurs, Sa Reverence Vient De Nous Dire 3 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II: Interlude: Que Se Passe-T'Il? 4 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 3: Prelude 5 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 3: Pourquoi Vous Tenez-Vous Ainsi? 6 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 3: Dans Des Temps Comme Ceux-Ci 7 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 3: Oh! Ne Me Quittez Pas Sur Un Adieu De Facherie! 8 Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II

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Scene 2: Remettez-Vous, Soeur Blanche 9 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 4: Prelude* 10 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 4: Mes Cheres Filles* 11 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 4: Qu'Allez-Vous Devenir?* 12 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 4: On A Tire La Clochette!* 13 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 4: Ou Sont Les Religieuses?* 14 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act II Scene 4: Mes Soeurs, Notre Reverende Mere Viendra Bientot* 15 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 1: Prelude* 16 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 1: Il Y A Une Seule Opposition* 17 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III: Interlude: Citoyennes, Nous Vous Felicitons* 18 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III: Interlude: Soeur Gerald, Il Faut Absolument Prevenir Le Pretre* 19 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 2: Prelude* 20 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 2: C'Est Vous* 21 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 2: Soeur Blanche De L'Agonie Du Christ!* 22 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 2: Interlude* 23 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 3: Mes Filles, Voila Que S'Acheve* 24 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 3: Le Tribunal Revolutionnaire* 25 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 3: Mes Filles, J'Ai Desire De Tout Mon Coeur* 26 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III: Interlude: Elles Sont Condamnees A Mort* 27 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 4: Prelude* 28 *Dialogues Des Carmelites, FP 159: Act III Scene 4: Salve Regina*

Sally Matthews (Blanche) Yann Beuron (Le Chevalier de la Force) Jean-Philippe Lafont (Le Marquis de la Force) Deborah Polaski (Madame de Croissy) Heidi Brunner (Madame Lidoine) Michelle Breedt (Mère Marie) Hendrickje van Kerckhove (Soeur Constance) Magdalena Anna Hofmann (Mere Jeanne) Christa Ratzenbock (Soeur Mathilde) Arnold Schoenberg Choir Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra Bertrand De Billy – conductor

Bertrand de Billy's live 2011 performance of *Dialogues des Carmélites* at Theater an der Wien is notable for the vigor of his conducting and his dramatic highlighting of the score's contrasts, which have rarely sounded so stark and tension-filled. He doesn't stint on conveying the music's generous lushness, in scenes such as the first, which is characterized by the composer's typically suave Gallic urbanity in its depiction of Blanche's aristocratic family. What comes as a revelation, though, are the outbursts of Stravinskian ruggedness in the orchestration and harmonies that de Billy does nothing to soften, which are especially evident in the orchestral interludes between scenes. His rhythmic control is crisp and precise, and points up the score's evocations of Baroque French opera, but he also gives the music plenty of room to breathe. The ORF Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien delivers the drama of de Billy's vision with urgency and plays the more lyrical sections with limpid, sumptuous tone.

The vocal casting is not consistently persuasive. Sally Matthews' voice is large and her vibrato is more pronounced than that of the rest of the cast, making her Blanche a far-from-typical characterization. The fact that her voice is so powerful in relation to the voices of the other singers makes for an imbalance that's at odds with the premise that Blanche is the opera's most

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timorous and tentative character. In a more vocally distinguished ensemble she could be highly effective because her characterization is intensely personal and deeply felt. Here, though, the other singers simply pale in comparison. The roles of the other nuns are sung without much distinctiveness, except for Hendrickje van Kerckhove's warm, luminous Sister Constance. Yann Beuron is strong and sympathetic as Blanche's brother, Le Chevalier de la Force. The sound is generally full, detailed, and clean, but the theatrical realism of the live performance doesn't compensate for the variability of balance and volume as the singers move around the stage.

The excellent orchestral playing and fine choral singing by the Arnold Schoenberg Chor, and especially de Billy's assured, insightful conducting make this a recording that anyone who loves the opera will want to hear, but it would not make the best introduction for newcomers.

---Stephen Eddins, Rovi

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