

Songs & Vexations

Works by Debussy, Dove,
Fauré & Satie

Claire Booth (soprano),
Susan Bickley (mezzo-soprano),
Andrew Matthews-Owen (piano)
Nimbus Alliance NI 6372 68:31 mins



In this beautifully curated postlude to the Debussy centenary year, pianist Andrew Matthews-Owen

is joined by singers Claire Booth and Susan Bickley in a programme that looks both outward to Debussy's contemporaries and inward to his personal life. The composer's *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*, written while still under the Wagnerian spell, forms the centrepiece, with Booth's rich lower register beguiling in 'Le jet d'eau', even if a shade more power would be welcome elsewhere.

Jonathan Dove's *Letters from Claude* draws on Debussy's letters to his wives, Lilly Texier and Emma Bardac, the texts capturing the essence of these passionate and tangled relationships. Written for these performers, the seven songs each take as their starting point a fragment from Debussy's music. It is enchanting, yet ultimately painfully sad, the final song juxtaposing the composer's despondency in the midst of war and illness with his cold rejection of Lily after their split.

The mood is gently lifted by songs from Bardac's former lover, Fauré, shared between the two singers, and Bickley sings the quixotic Satie melodies that frame the recital. There is a periodic husk to both singers' voices that cannot always be attributed to honesty of expression, yet there is so much to enjoy here. Matthews-Owen judges the pace exquisitely throughout, while the segue from Satie's *Vexations* to the closing 'Je te veux' is a masterstroke.

Christopher Dingle

PERFORMANCE ★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★