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Songs and Vexations

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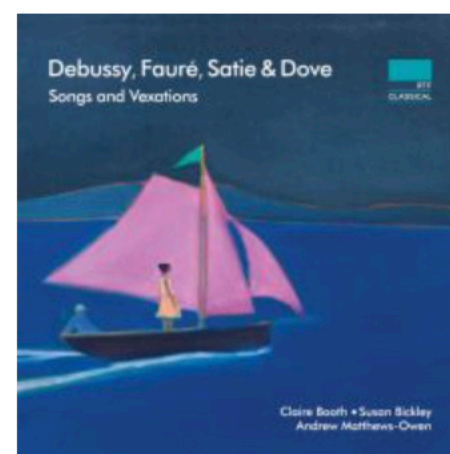
Author: Hugo Shirley

In his booklet note Andrew Matthews–Owen explains the long gestation of this programme. But you can already get a sense from just diving straight in: we've a careful and astute selection of some wonderful songs by Debussy and those around him, clustered around an eminently enjoyable new commission from Jonathan Dove.

Letters from Claude is essentially just that. Dove takes passages from his letters to two women, which reflect the complexity of Debussy's love life: Rosalie Texier (aka Lilly), who agreed to marry him after he threatened suicide; and Emma Bardac, the mother of one of his pupils and whom he married four years after breaking things off with Lilly.

The letters to both, therefore, reflect very different stages in the respective relationships, and they are split between Claire Booth and Susan Bickley according to recipient. Sometimes they sing reflectively alone, sometimes set together in counterpoint: Debussy's words are brought to life, then, through their 'readings' by both women. It's a complex idea but one that is cleverly and engagingly realised by Dove in music that takes Debussy as its starting point, before heading into more contemporary musical worlds. And it's difficult to imagine it much better performed than here.

Essentially the emotional centrepiece of the disc nevertheless remains Debussy's own ever-remarkable *Cinq Poèmes de Charles Baudelaire*. Booth throws herself fully into their heady world, her voice breathy and open in its timbre and often indecently sensuous – and always used intelligently. Matthews–Owen rises to the challenges of the piano parts very impressively. The Satie songs are somewhat overshadowed in comparison, and Bickley's mezzo is not always ideally refined, but there's little resisting the gorgeous opening 'Elégie', even if it's not in the same languid league as Barbara Hannigan's account on her Satie recital (Winter & Winter, 6/16). Add in fine accounts of Fauré's chansons (Booth's 'Au bord de l'eau', in particular, is terrific) and this amounts to a rewarding recital and, especially with Dove's new work, a valuable addition to the catalogue.



Songs and Vexations

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Elégie

(3) Mélodies

(5) Poèmes de Charles Baudelaire

Letters from Claude

(2) Songs, No. 2, Clair de lune
(wds. Verlaine)(3) Songs, No. 1, Au bord de l'eau
(wds. Prudhomme: 1875)

Après une Rêve

(4) Songs, No. 4, Les Roses
d'Ispahan (wds. de Lisle)

Nocturne

Air du poète

Vexations

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