



MUSICAL *Opinion*

Holst: At the Boar's Head (complete), Op 42*; Vaughan Williams: Riders to the Sea**

Jonathan Lemalu*. Anna Fiałkowska**. Evanna Chiew**. Eric Barry*. Pawel Kołodziej*. Krzysztof Szumański*. Kathleen Reveille. Gary Griffiths. Nichole Percifield. Warsaw Chamber Opera Sinfonietta / Łukasz Borowicz

Dux DUX 1307-8 (2CDs)

[1 hour 34 minutes]

Vázquez, Sierra, Liang, Paredes: Cuatro Corridos

Susan Narucki, soprano, Pablo Gomez, guitar, Aleck Karis, piano, Ayano Kataoka, percussion

Bridge BRIDGE 9473

[54 minutes]

Ahmas: Snake Ring

Ulla Raiskio, mezzo, Ilkka Laasonen, narrator, Zagros Ensemble / Petri Komulainen

Alba ABCD 394: 1-2 (2CDs)

[1 hour 36 minutes]

Gustav Holst's relationship with opera as a medium was not a happy one. Most misfired—even were they performed at all—and only his ninth and final operatic work, the one-act *The Wandering Scholar* (1929-30) achieved a measure of success. The largest of his later operatic endeavours was the eighth, *At the Boar's Head* (1924), a near-hour-long one-act work dubbed a "musical interlude", though an interlude to what is not clear. A unique, innovative mix of folk, comic and ballad opera (it was not well received at its premiere), Holst fashioned the libretto for *At the Boar's Head* from the scenes set in the infamous Cheapside tavern (mostly) of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* diptych, plus episodes relating to the central character, Falstaff, a couple of sonnets and some traditional songs. Indeed, almost all the themes were derived from older collections much as Hindemith would so a decade later—and on a rather bigger scale—in *Mathis*

der maler. I concur with Ernest Newman's view in the *Musical Times* in 1925 that it was "a feast of good things, and a remarkably clever experiment in quite a new form."

Dux's recording, made live in concert in March last year, is of the complete score unlike previous outings. The fine English-speaking or -singing cast, headed by Jonathan Lemalu as the incorrigible rogue-knight, relish the score's lyrical invention. Eric Barry as Prince Hal and Gary Griffiths and Kathleen Reveille as the gloriously bickering Ancient Pistol and Doll Tearsheet are a delight, accompanied superbly by the Warsaw Chamber Opera Sinfonietta. Of the Polish singers, Krzysztof Szumanski as Bardolph is the pick but in truth there are no weak links in this beautifully prepared account. Łukasz Borowicz's grasp of Holst's freewheeling structure is assured.

Ralph Vaughan Williams also essayed Falstaff operatically, in *Sir John in Love* (1927, derived rather from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), but the coupling in Dux's terrific twofer is *Riders to the Sea* (1925-32), also recorded live. A more integrated, intense one-act drama (running here to just under 39 minutes), it is based on J M Synge's short, bleak play. Maurya and her daughters are confronted by the deaths in rapid succession of Maurya's two sons, Bartley and Michael, the 'Riders' seen by Maurya in a premonition as Bartley takes to ponies to a seaside market. Vaughan Williams' theatrical experience paid dividends in the sure pacing of the drama. Borowicz again conducts assuredly, headed by Reveille as Maurya, with Gary Griffiths as the doomed Bartley. Reveille's tonal quality may not be to everyone's taste—she seems more comfortable as Maurya than Doll, to be sure—but she is the vivid heart of this compelling account, ably supported again by the Warsaw Chamber Opera Sinfonietta as well as the Warsaw Philharmonic Women's Chamber Choir. Strongly recommended.

Cuatro Corridos ("Four Ballads", 2012-3) is a very different proposition, though its tragic bearing is coupled with a high seriousness of purpose in exposing a terrible wrong. The four scenes of this viscerally gripping chamber opera, scored for just four performers to Jorge Vilpi's no-holds-barred libretto, are by four different composers—split equally between Mexico and the US, male and female—and relate stages in the exposure of an horrific human trafficking ring in northern Mexico. Each scene is in effect a monologue centred on a particular character in the sorry tale. *Azucena*, by Hebert Vasquez, is one of the trafficked women whose journey into abuse takes the form of the Mexican ballad form, the *corrido*. Vasquez's use of the folk idiom is entirely different in technique to Holst's use of folk idiom *Dalia* is the matriarchal pedlar caught in the panic of imminent arrest by British-resident Arlene Sierra's subtle score, combining raw vocal terror with an at times euphonious accompaniment the furious pace of which emulates the criminal's racing heartbeat. *Rose* (by Lei Liang) is a police officer almost imprisoned in the press conference relating the details of the ring's breaking. Hilda Paredes' concluding *La Tierra del Miel* tells the story of the murdered iris, but through the voice of another victim, Violeta. The soprano Susan Narucki, who commissioned the project for the University of California at San Diego, commands

as the various women in an operatic tour-de-force, but credit must go too to her more-than-accompanists: guitarist Pablo Gomez, pianist Aleck Karis and percussionist Ayano Kataoka, whose contributions are just as individually and collectively vital as that of the four musicians in what seems, with hindsight, the progenitor work of *Cuatro Corridos*: Henze's *El Cimarron* which also dealt with a difficult subject, the endurance of and escape from slavery. *Cuatro Corridos* is a remarkable achievement. The performance is superb and Bridge's recording a triumph.

Harri Ahmas is a Finnish composer possibly better known as principal bassoonist of the Lahti Symphony Orchestra. His chamber opera *Käärmesormus* (Snake Ring, 2007-8) is by a distance the largest work of those reviewed here, in 2 acts and 96 minutes running time. The opera, like Saariaho's *L'Amour de Loin* and Benjamin's *Written on Skin*, is a story of distant, deferred love set during the Middle Ages, in this case turn-of-the-fifteenth century France, a tale in two parts, of overlapping, intermingled light and dark. In Act 1 the heroine, Beata Lyonnaise, is given away in marriage to a wealthy, older husband, but her glittering wedding is overcast by her longing for another man. The subsequent marriage is marred by the death of her first child and the threat of plague and Act 1 closes as she gives herself to her lover. Act 2 is darker: the children and lover are gone, the husband dies. Yet out of this darkness, Beata herself is happier and self-reliant, a herbalist and healer. The autumnal lyricism familiar from other Ahmas' works, such as the *Viola Concerto* (2004) is much in evidence here, although there are touches here and there of 'older' music, whether colouristic—as in the use of a harpsichord—or folkloric to deepen the opera's flavour. The musical voice is not as unique as Saariaho's or Benjamin's but the craftsmanship is undeniable.

Unlike *Cuatro Corridos*, which grabs the listener by the throat and never lets up, *The Snake Ring* is a slow-burner of an opera (like *At the Boar's Head*). Ulla Raiskio insinuates herself into one's consciousness as Beata—the most multi-faceted character in the four operas—and Petri Komulainen, like Ahmas a principal instrumentalist at Lahti (on the horn) directs with aplomb. The Zagros Ensemble contribute superbly and Alba's recording is very fine.

Guy Rickards