

Dante, Godard

Véronique Gens (*Béatrice*), Diana Axentii (*L'Ecolier*), Rachel Frenkel (*Gemma*), Edgaras Montvidas (*Dante*), Andrew Lepri Meyer (*Un Héraut d'armes*), Jean-Francois Lapointe (*Bardi*), Andrew Foster-Williams (*L'Ombre de Virgile/Un Viellard*), Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks, Münchner Rundfunkorchester, c. Ulf Schirmer. Ediciones Singulares ES 1029 (two CDs)

Palazzetto Bru Zane's invaluable exploration of the byways of French opera continues with Benjamin Godard's *Dante*, which was premiered by the Opéra-Comique in 1890. Like the preceding 15 entries in the series, this recording forms part of a package which includes a beautifully designed hardcover book filled with informative historical essays, background material and rare illustrations.

In his short, 46-year life, Godard proved to be a remarkably prolific composer, though not a particularly popular one. His operas are little heard today. An eccentric, solitary man, he refused to identify with any particular musical style or fashion and claimed total lack of interest in the works of Wagner. In contemporary parlance, he refused to 'play the game', and that may have contributed to the limited scale of his success. Or perhaps it was just a matter of his music not being particularly gripping or memorable, if this recording is any indication. The libretto of *Dante*, by Édouard Blau (one of the librettists of Massenet's *Werther*), places the Renaissance poet in a position similar to Goethe's tortured hero: Dante loves the fair Béatrice, who returns his affection, but both feel compelled to renounce each other due to the fact that Dante's dear friend Simone Bardi already loves Béatrice. Like Albert, Bardi turns on both Dante and Béatrice, intent on destroying their love. By the end of the opera, when Bardi has a change of heart, it is already too late—Béatrice dies of a broken heart in the shelter of a convent.

Godard's score is certainly grand and expansive, with long melodic structures and some rousing climaxes, particularly at the end of the first of the opera's four

acts. But for all Godard's effort, the music fails to engage the listener on an emotional level the way Massenet's does. Worthy though it may be in intent, it doesn't linger in the memory, nor does it encourage repeated listening. What it does engender is a kind of cold admiration. The part that should be a musical masterstroke—Dante's 20-minute fever-dream vision of his forthcoming *Inferno* and *Paradiso*—comes and goes with little sense of musical or dramatic distinction.

Is *Dante* worth hearing? Certainly, because it throws the achievements of Godard's contemporaries into sharper relief, and it fills in a missing piece of musical history. In this recording, Ulf Schirmer and the Münchner Rundfunkorchester treat it with the proper respect, though the Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks under Stellario Fagone could have cleaned up its French

■ Véronique Gens

