



An interview with Anna Prohaska



How do you prepare for a massive work like this?

I sang about half of the fragments as a student, so I was familiar with the piece, but I actually sang the whole cycle for the first time with Isabelle in 2019. The best thing is to immerse yourself in Kafka first of all, both in these fragments and also his other literature – which I've loved for a long time. It just lends itself to an expressionistic way of performing with the voice and it's not hard to get into that zone, to be honest, because the music is so intertwined with what the writer wanted to express.

What's the most challenging moment for you?

There is a piece I decided I wanted to record last: 'Nichts dergleichen' (Nothing of the kind), in which I have to scream 'Nein, Nein, Nein!' at the highest possible note. It's challenging in the middle of a performance of the cycle to not over-tax the voice so that I can't sing all the other beautiful lyrical things. In the studio you can record them in the order that you would prefer, or that the voice prefers.

What was it like to work closely on this with Isabelle Faust?

It really is a big mountain, especially for the violin, because Kurtág uses all sorts of possible and impossible techniques. Sometimes I thought she must have 20 fingers and four hands to be able to actually play this stuff! Her musical heart beats in the same way that mine does, and we both try to be in touch with as many musical eras as possible, but in the most authentic way. I think this is something that really connects us both.

Fearless double act: Anna Prohaska and Isabelle Faust have great chemistry



strive to push beyond the containment, creating huge worlds within the space of a few seconds. 'Es zupfte mich jemand am Kleid' (Someone tugged at my clothes) notches up a blink-and-you-miss-it 13 seconds. Except you don't blink, nor miss anything. 'Verstecke' (Hiding Places) and 'Ruhelos' (Restless) stretch to a positively expansive 24 seconds each.

That's partly down to Kurtág's fastidious precision – whether evoking the rustle of leaves in 'Wie ein Weg im Herbst' (Like a Path in Autumn) or skewering the conflicting, ennui-fuelled emotions of 'Sonntag den 19 Juli, 1910' (Sunday 19 July, 1910). But it's also testament to the consummate chemistry between Anna Prohaska and

Isabelle Faust. Across the whole cycle their intuitive rapport never falters and, feeding off each other, the sparks they generate meld the fragments into something greater than the sum of their parts.

There's no shortage of good recordings in the catalogue, but this might be the best yet

Prohaska floats the hushed rapture of 'Berceuse I' with a bell-like purity and poise yet rises to the deranged squawking of 'Nichts dergleichen' (Nothing of the kind) with unbridled gusto. A sultry languor pervades 'Träumend hing die Blume' (The flower hung dreamily), while 'Szene

in der Elektrischen' (Scene in the tram) is aquiver with vivid storytelling – Faust, given her head, positively runs with it. There's wit, eroticism and disarming charm in abundance. Passion too. But not quite everything is writ small. The second of the four sections comprises a single fragment, a seven-minute 'hommage-message à Pierre Boulez' that weaves a skein of affecting gravitas; and the final number, 'Es blendete uns die Mondnacht' (The moonlit night dazzles us), signs off with extended silvery moonbathing and the slither of snakes. Kurtág is never an easy listen, but in a disc as indispensable as this, he's an essential one.

PERFORMANCE
RECORDING

★★★★★
★★★★★

Reviews

Recordings and books rated by expert critics

Welcome



Many of you may be reading this just before the Last Night of the Proms, so it's perhaps fitting that we've a host of home-grown composers for

whom to wave a flag this issue. We've everything from a Welsh-language opera from the Belfast-born Stephen McNeff to ballet music with a French title by Arthur Sullivan. Britten also goes French with *Les Illuminations*, but there's thoroughly English music by Cheryl Frances-Hoad, Frank Bridge, Howard Skempton, Ruth Gipps and Richard Arnell. And what could be more patriotic than some *Coronation Anthems*, even if they were written by a German-born composer? Beyond that, we've some fascinating wartime recordings in our Historical round-up, plus live recordings of Vaughan Williams, Mozart and Beethoven. **Michael Beek** *Reviews editor*

This month's critics

John Allison, Nicholas Anderson, Michael Beek, Terry Blain, Kate Bolton-Porciatti, Geoff Brown, Michael Church, Christopher Cook, Martin Cotton, Christopher Dingle, Misha Donat, Jessica Duchan, Rebecca Franks, Andrew Green, George Hall, Malcolm Hayes, Julian Haylock, Claire Jackson, Daniel Jaffe, Berta Joncus, Erik Levi, Natasha Loges, Andrew McGregor, David Nice, Roger Nichols, Bayan Northcott, Ingrid Pearson, Steph Power, Anthony Pryer, Paul Riley, Michael Tanner, Roger Thomas, Sarah Urwin Jones, Kate Wakeling, Helen Wallace, Alexandra Wilson

KEY TO STAR RATINGS

- ★★★★★ Outstanding
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★ Good
- ★★ Disappointing
- ★ Poor

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Kurtág, Prohaska and Faust make sparks fly

The soprano and violinist put on a riveting show in this unbeatable recording of the vivid *Kafka-Fragmente*, says **Paul Riley**



György Kurtág

Kafka-Fragmente

Anna Prohaska (soprano),
Isabelle Faust (violin)
Harmonia Mundi HMM902359
SR06 mins

Begun in 1985 and premiered two years later, György Kurtág's Kafka-derived miniatures occupy that happy meeting place where words and music seem almost to have been made for each other. His interest in the Czech writer had been rekindled during study in Paris towards the end of the 1950s, and that stay had turned his musical world upside down. Suddenly the whole landscape of the Western avant-garde opened up before

him, and Kurtág's increasingly economical sensibility would chime with the compressed epiphanies to be found in the aphoristic jottings he culled from Kafka's letters, diaries and notebooks. Just a few words are able to convey a sense of understanding awakened, and of the universality of the commonplace. Fragmentary, too, are the means with which Kurtág chooses to embed them: a voice and solo violin.

There's no shortage of good recordings in the catalogue, but this new one might well be the best yet, eclipsing even the fine BIS account from Caroline Melzer and Nurit Stark, or Juliane Banse and Andrés Keller on ECM. It goes without saying that the work requires a soprano of fearless technique who is also a singing actress to her fingertips, and a violinist with virtuosity to spare. But it's not enough to perform the *Kafka-Fragmente*. They have to be lived – and sometimes conveyed in a mere instant. Whereas Webern's miniatures seem to be contained within their length, Kurtág's so often