

Audio Review

Max Bruch: *Die Loreley*. CPO 777 005-2, 2018.

Performers: Michaela Kaune (Lenore/Loreley), Magdalena Hinterdobler (Countess Bertha), Thomas Mohr (Count Otto), Benedikt Eder (Leupold), Jan-Hendrik Rootering (Reinald), Sebastian Campione (Hubert); Munich Radio Orchestra, Prague Philharmonic Chorus, conducted by Stefan Blunier

This is how to present an important, long-forgotten opera to the listening public! CPO here offers music lovers, apparently for the first time, a 2014 radio broadcast of a concert performance of Max Bruch's *Die Loreley*, using very high-level performers. Not least, nearly all of the solo singers are native German-speakers. (The one exception is Greek-born Danae Kontora, an exquisitely accomplished high soprano in a small role: she gets a lovely solo, but her accent clearly reveals her background.)

Yes, Bruch wrote an opera—indeed, three. *Die Loreley*, the second of them, reached the stage in 1863, when he was twenty-five years old, before an enthusiastic audience that included Clara Schumann, Anton Rubinstein, and other noted musicians associated with the Mendelssohn/Schumann circle. The passionate and highly literate libretto had been penned by Emanuel Geibel for Mendelssohn, who set several scenes from it but did not complete the work.

The plot derives from the Romantic-era legend of a young woman who, spurned by the man she loved, made a deal with the spirits of the Rhine River to become unusually beautiful in looks and singing voice. Ever since then, she has dwelled at the top of a cliff—where the Rhine River below makes a bend—and has exacted revenge on mortal men by distracting sailors, who then crash against the rocky wall. The legend became renowned through a poem by Clemens von Brentano and through beloved songs by Schumann (using an Eichendorff poem: “Waldesgespräch”) and by Friedrich Silcher (using one by Heine: “Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten”).

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Geibel fleshes out the legend in interesting ways. Count Otto has agreed to marry Bertha, the daughter of the archbishop. Yet he somehow thinks he can manage a regular sunset-hour dalliance with Lenore (the future Loreley), daughter of a modest innkeeper, and to keep his identity a secret from her. While the two are meeting, church bells remind Otto of his promised union, and he runs back to town. In the short but highly dramatic act 2, the despondent Lenore strikes her deal with the spirits of the Rhine, thinking to win her lover for good.

In act 3, Lenore shows up at the castle, only to discover that the man in whom she has put her hopes is highborn and, worse, has just married. Bertha, the new bride, is properly horrified and sings an extended and touching aria of desolation. The archbishop then tries to sentence Lenore to death at the stake, but is charmed—as are all the other men on stage—by Lenore. Otto tries to win Lenore back, and the archbishop excommunicates him.

The final act begins with a cheerful scene in which the vintners sing the praises of autumn, but news comes that Bertha has died. Lenore’s father, recognizing the damage that his daughter has done, sings a remorseful song. Otto heads off to the Rhine to try to win back the bewitching Lenore. But she now rejects him, and he leaps to his death, thereby becoming the second victim (after Bertha) of the woman who is now “the Loreley.”

I was delighted by the music throughout. Bruch biographer Christopher Fifield puts it well, in *Oxford Music Online*: “Though Bruch’s harmonic language, rooted in the Classical tradition, is conservative, his opera is deftly orchestrated and full of beautiful melodies.” Fifield specifically mentions influences from Weber and Spohr. I noticed a powerful passage that seems inspired by Beethoven’s *Egmont* overture. The freedom of phrase structure in a drinking song for the Minnesänger Reinald seems to look forward to the “Cobbler’s Song” in Wagner’s *Meistersinger*. The opera includes strongly dramatic confrontations but also numerous strophic (or partly strophic) numbers that capture a sense of the folklike and the pious (including an “Ave Maria”).

The cast includes several truly superb singers. Michaela Kaune brings Lenore/Loreley to life with a voice that floats and soars. Thomas Mohr started his career as a much-appreciated baritone. (I praised a 1997 recording with him of a Holzbauer opera in the *American Record Guide* 82, no. 1 [January/February 2019].) Since 2005, Mohr has sung Heldentenor roles. His voice phrases eloquently and cuts powerfully. Had there been a chance for retakes, he might have been able to hit certain notes just a little more squarely on pitch. Interestingly, he has no problem with the highest ones!

I was always happy when Benedikt Eder (as Otto’s buddy) and Sebastian Campione (as father Hubert) were singing. The single most famous, and no doubt oldest, of the singers, Jan-Hendrik Rootering (a German, despite his Dutch name), delivers his numerous

passages, and his act 3 drinking song, very effectively. His voice has quite a wobble, though. The soprano playing Bertha wobbles as well, mainly on long notes. Perhaps the role overtaxed her. (Hinderdabler is known for lighter assignments such as Pamina and Gretel.)

The Munich Radio Orchestra is magnificent, and conductor Blunier often adjusts the tempo slightly for expressive or dramatic effect. The Prague chorus gets multiple chances to display its rich, blended sound.

One small complaint: the four acts could have been fit onto 2 CDs. Though, admittedly, that would have required splitting Act 3 (probably just before Lenore/Loreley's seductive song at the wedding celebration).

I'd love now to hear Bruch's other two operas! And his numerous cantatas and oratorios, some of which had a long life in Germany, England, and elsewhere and have been favorably reviewed assessed by well-informed music critics and scholars.

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