

# OPERA TODAY

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## ★ RECENTLY IN REVIEWS

### Ariane et Barbe-Bleue on Blu-Ray

Paul Dukas' *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, first heard in 1907, once seemed important. Arturo Toscanini conducted the Met premiere in 1911 with Farrar and later arranged some of its music for a 1947 recording with his NBC Symphony.

### Kaufmann Wagner

The economics of the recording companies dictate much that is not ideal. Wagner's operas were not composed as they were in order to permit the extraction of bleeding chunks, even on those occasions when strophic song forms do occur.

### Mahler: Symphony No. 8

Among the recent recordings of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, Valery Gergiev's release on the LSO Live label is an excellent addition to the discography of this work.

### Songs by Zemlinsky

While not unknown, the songs of Alexander von Zemlinsky (1871-1942) deserve to be heard more frequently.

### Gustav Mahler: Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen, Rückert-Lieder, Kindertotenlieder.

Recorded on 5 and 6 May 2008 and 17 and 18 January 2009 at the Lisztzentrum (Raiding, Austria), this recent Bridge release makes available the piano-vocal versions of three song cycles by Gustav Mahler, *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, *Rückert-Lieder*, and *Kindertotenlieder* performed by mezzo-soprano Hermine Haselböck, accompanied by Russell Ryan.

**Kathleen Ferrier: A Film by Diane Perelsztejn**  
Contraltos rarely achieve the acclaim and renown of sopranos. Assigned few leading roles in opera, they are condemned to playing the villain or the grandmother, or to stealing the castrati's trousers in *en travesti* roles.

### 1612 Italian Vespers

Following their 2011 Decca recording of Striggio's *Mass in 40 Parts* (1566), I Fagiolini continue their quest to unearth lost treasures of the High Renaissance and early Baroque, with this collection of world-premiere recordings, 'reconstructions' and 'restitutions' of music by Giovanni and Andrea Gabrieli, Monteverdi, Palestrina, and their less well-known compatriots Viadana, Barbarino and Soriano.

**Eternal Echoes: Songs and Dances for the Soul**  
*Eternal Echoes* is an album of *khazones* [Jewish cantorial music] for cantorial soloist, solo violin and a blended instrumental ensemble comprising a small orchestra and the Klezmer Conservatory Band.

**Mahler: Symphony no. 3 / Kindertotenlieder**  
Michael Tilson Thomas's recording of Mahler's Third Symphony is an outstanding contribution to the composer's discography.

### Oliver Knussen's Symphonies from NMC

Oliver Knussen burst into British music with an unprecedented flourish. In 1967, the London Symphony Orchestra premiered Knussen's First Symphony, with István Kertész scheduled to conduct.

### Ludwig van Beethoven: Fidelio

Based on performances given in Summer 2010 at

## ★ REVIEWS



20 May 2013

## Ariane et Barbe-Bleue on Blu-Ray

Paul Dukas' *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, first heard in 1907, once seemed important. Arturo Toscanini conducted the Met premiere in 1911 with Farrar and later arranged some of its music for a 1947 recording with his NBC Symphony.

Now it is an intriguing second-rank work whose time may have come again. Recent performances have led to recordings under Bertrand de Billy and Leon Botstein, re-releases on classic recordings under Armin Jordan, Gary Bertini, Tony Aubin and Jean Martinon, and now this first Blu-Ray under Stéphane Denève from the Gran Teatre del Liceu.

The music and the production, which I witnessed live in Barcelona, are reproduced faithfully here in high-resolution Blu-Ray quality. Musically, the best thing about it is Denève's conducting. He manages to convey Dukas' half-tone mix of Debussy, Wagner and Strauss (all of whom are both quoted and imitated in the score), though he struggles to keep the volume down and achieve the requisite palette of orchestral color. The singing is no more than adequate. Jeanne-Michèle Charbonnet is committed singer with a large voice, good diction, and stage presence, but her tone quality is unpleasantly stressed by louder and

Paul Dukas: Ariane et Barbe-Bleue

A review by Andrew Moravcsik

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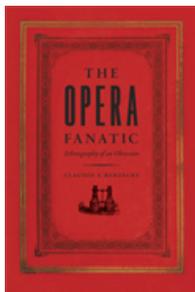
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the Lucerne Festival, this recording of Beethoven's *Fidelio* is an admirable recording that captures the vitality of the work as conducted by Claudio Abbado.

**Stanisław Moniuszko: Flis**

Stanisław Moniuszko (1819-1872) was one of the most popular composers of his day in Poland, and of the many works he wrote for the stage, two are performed from time to time, *Halka* (1848) and *Strazny dwór* [The Haunted Manor] (1865).

**Stanisław Moniuszko: Pieśni Songs**

The Polish alto Jadwiga Rappé is a familiar voice in various stage and concert works, and the recent release of a selection of songs by Stanisław Moniuszko (1819-1872) is an opportunity to hear her performing artsongs.

**Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonyng: Serate Musicali**

Originally released on multiple discs in 1981 this reissue on two CDs is a comprehensive collection of art songs by Italian and French composers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Richard Strauss: Salome**

An exciting contribution to the discography of this popular opera, the live performance of Richard Strauss's *Salome* from the Festspielhaus at Baden-Baden is a compelling DVD.

**Lulu by Gran Teatro del Liceu, Barcelona**

Released in late 2011, Deutsche Grammophon's DVD of the new staging of Berg's *Lulu* at the Gran Teatro del Liceu, Barcelona is an excellent contribution to the discography of this fascinating opera.

**Lulu by the Metropolitan Opera**

A recent release by the Metropolitan Opera, this two-disc set makes available on DVD the famous performance of Berg's *Lulu* that was broadcast on 20 December 1980 as part of the PBS series "Live from the Met."

**Elmer Gantry the Opera**

The novels of Sinclair Lewis once shot across the American literary skies like comets, alarming and fascinating readers of that era, but their tails didn't extend far behind them.

**Historical Performances from Covent Garden: Barbieri, La traviata and Tosca**

Once the province of only the most dedicated opera fanatics, mid-20th century recordings of privately taped live performances have become more widely available.

**Lucia and the glass harmonica**

Flute players in opera orchestra around the world must look forward to the frequent appearances of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, knowing that while the stage spotlight in the mad scene will be on the soprano, the orchestral spotlight will be on their instrument.

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higher passages in way that grates in an opera where she is continuously on stage. Irish soprano Patricia Barden has made something of a specialty of the Nurse, and she is solid, though shows similar strains. José van Dam delivers a focused, careful performance of the surprisingly short role of Barbe-Bleue; though over 70 at the time of the production, looks more convincing on stage than anyone else. Of the wives, the strongest musically is rising Catalan mezzo-soprano Gemma Coma-Alabert as Sélysette. Yet all this does not add up to a recording that matches the best CD effort (under Armin Jordan) or even Toscanini's excerpt.

So the case for seeking out this recording comes down to the production of Claus Guth. Any smart and successful German opera director these days—Guth is both—bends the libretto's explicit instructions. Most spectators, lacking previous experience with *Ariane*, will find the result in this case confusing: its sparseness leads to absurd inconsistencies with the libretto. Those with some knowledge of the work, or the time and inclination to think through Guth's production, may be even more troubled. Guth's basic interpretive trope is to modernize settings and then to contrast bleak naturalism to individual madness. For him, every libretto contains a hidden *Wozzeck* longing to get out. This treatment is singularly unsuited to Dukas' delicate and subtle work.

To see why, a little background is useful. The Nobel-prize winning Belgian Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck—who provided *Ariane's* libretto and that of Debussy's *Pelleas*—was widely viewed as the greatest Francophone writer of his time. He believed that human emotions and choice are secondary. We are all marionettes driven by silent, slow-moving forces of which we are, at best, semi-conscious. His plays do not portray stark realities, philosophical concepts or madness, but moods, often of feminine melancholy and foreboding. Maeterlinck seeks to capture these deeper forces and moods through deliberately ambiguous symbols, metaphors and rituals couched in sparse French prose-poetry.

The plot, as Maeterlinck and Dukas meant it to be, turns neither on Ariane's relentless impulse to liberate, nor on the feeble resistance of Barbe-Bleue, but on the fact that his five former wives do not in the end leave their wounded warrior, reactionary though he may be. Not by chance, they are evocatively named Sélysette, Ygraine, Bellangère, Alladine, and Mélisande—all mythic heroines from Maeterlinck's beloved previous dramas. Nor is it incidental that Dukas serenades them with his most lovely music: the chorus of the daughters of Orlamonde, two sets of jewel variations, the escape from the dungeons, and the finale. The staging and costuming instructions portray them as unique visions. Whether they are real, or just visions of what Ariane might be or thinks they are, is unclear. Yet Maeterlinck and Dukas's underlying message is clear as it is deliberately ambivalent: the ancient world of richly imaginative private visions and the modern world of public justice and mass equality cannot coexist or even communicate. Those who discover this are not crazy, even if they cannot express precisely why they act as they do. They are just profoundly human.

Guth has no sense of these existential and historical undertones, or he chooses to ignore them in the interest of a chic and topical setting. So Maeterlinck's medieval castle, with its finely shaded distinctions between gloomy interiors and imaginary vistas of stained glass, forests and the sea, becomes the plain off-white interior of a row house, suggesting an asylum.

Barbe-Bleue becomes a suburban psychopath who compensates for his masculine inadequacies by keeping five former wives chained in its cellar. Ariane becomes a woman's libber who sweeps in with the opening chord proclaiming freedom and independence for all, quickly dominates her new husband, and rescues his prisoners.

The sole reason left for the wives to reject Ariane's road to freedom in favor of servitude in the hands of a criminal is because they are insane, as indicated by their relentless eye rolling, limb twitching, hair twisting, and clutching of stuffed animals. To assume that fictional characters must be out of their minds to act as they do demonstrates a lack of dramaturgical and cultural imagination. This transforms what could be a subtle and challenging opera into a very long evening indeed.

**Andrew Moravcsik**



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