



## J. Novák: Dido - Mimus Magicus

aud 63.413

American Record Guide 5/2001 (Charles H. Parsons - 2001.09.01)



The Czech composer Jan Novak (1921-84) was deeply interested in Latin literature and poetry. For him Latin was still a living language, and he even wrote poetry and prose in Latin. In 1983 he founded the Latin music festival Ludi Latini. Born in Moravia, Novak studied in America with Martinu and Copland. In 1948 he returned to Moravia, but the political turmoil and violence of the "Prague Spring" in 1968 forced the composer and his family to flee Czechoslovakia, moving to Denmark, then Italy, and finally Germany. As an ex-patriot Czech and a Latin humanist Novak found little acceptance. His catalog of compositions lists settings of many of the great traditional Latin masters: Catullus, Virgil, Horace, Tibullus, Seneca, Cicero, and Caesar. Perhaps the oddest of his compositions is a setting of recipes from the "Cook Book" of Apicius! From the play Dulcitiuus by Germany's first poetess Hrotsvitha von Gandersheim, Novak constructed a comic opera. Modern Latin texts included ones by Josef Eberle and Harry C Schnur . To teach children to enjoy Latin Novak even composed music for children with Latin texts.

Novak's cantata Dido gets its text from the fourth book of The Aeneid of Virgil. The cantata covers much the same territory as Henry Purcell's opera Dido and Aeneas. It was first performed in 1967 in Brno. A mezzo-soprano (voce media) portrays Dido as a narrator (recitans) tells the tale with commentary by a men's chorus (here the Choro virorum symphoniacisque stationis radiophonicae Bavaricae adstreptibus). The work bears some resemblance to Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex, with a similar use of a men's chorus and a major role for mezzo-soprano. Novak's narrator plays a much more important role than Stravinsky's. The two works also have a similarity of propulsive rhythms, but in general Novak's music is much more romantic sounding, less detached, less acerbic.

This 1982 performance is a fine one, with Kubelik in firm command, driving the work to its dramatic conclusion. Schmiege may not have the most attractive voice, but she sings most musically, with a warmth and breadth of vocal power combined with dramatic insight. Fiedler was the first to perform the sprechstimme role of Moses in Schoenberg's Moses and Aaron (1954) and he performs here with immense dignity and expression.

The 13-minute Mimus Magicus (1969) is a setting of portions of Virgil's eighth eclogue, Bucolica. Like Dido it deals with love, but instead of seeking death as a remedy for love, the heroine here tries to win back her unfaithful lover through the use of magic spells. Here the musical forces are much reduced, requiring only a soprano soloist (voce acuta), a flute (calamo traverso), and a piano (clavibus pulsatis). Novak does less with these lesser forces, but it isn't quite fair to judge the work on the basis of this inadequate 1986 performance. Soprano (voce acuta) Kurokouchi should be voce acerba! Pitches are woefully misplaced, particular in the higher range, and an acidic quality colors the entire voice. Enjoy the Dido, but this is "Minimus Magicus".

A libretto in Latin, English, and German is included. Even the program notes and performance-recording credits are in Latin!

Fono Forum 10/1999 (Matthias Norquet - 1999.10.01)



Er lebte und komponierte für die lateinische Sprache. Jan Novák (nicht zu verwechseln mit seinem ein halbes Jahrhundert früher geborenen Namensvetter Vitezlav Novák) war damit allerdings weniger erfolgreich als Orff oder Strawinsky, wird bei Audite auch nicht mit Neueinspielungen geehrt, sondern mit Archivaufnahmen des Bayerischen Rundfunks. Dazu keine Novität, sondern eine Wiederauflage, willkommen allerdings bei diesem Komponisten, der mit hochentflammter Emotionssprache einigermaßen quer steht zu zeitgenössischer Laboratoriumsarbeit.

Bei seiner Kantate "Dido" (1967) hat Novák eine Singstimme von imperialer Couleur vor Ohren, wie sie Marilyn Schmiege in wahrhaft überragender und glückhafter Weise zu Gebote steht. Rafael Kubelik ließ sich während seiner Münchner Chef-Jahre die "own country"-Musik besonders angelegen sein. Auch bei diesem entlegenen Werk spürt man Kompetenz und Hingabe; Orff-Vertrautheit intensiviert antikisches Flair.

Entschieden karger, von einer quasi inneren Unruhe immer wieder ins Presto getrieben, gibt sich die Musik des "Mimus magicus", unmittelbar nach "Dido" wie das Satyrspiel nach einer Tragödie wirkend. Der musikalische Faltenwurf wird hier gegen einen nervös vibrierenden Gestus eingetauscht, welcher die Zaubersprachen einer eifersüchtig liebenden Frau sinnfällig spiegelt. Eindrucksvoll die Sopranistin Makiko Kurokouchi.

www.classicalcdreview.com July 2001 (S.G.S. - 2001.07.01)

I acquired this disc under the mistaken impression that the composer was Jan Witoslav Novák (1870-1949), but apparently there are as many Jan Nováks in Czechoslovakia as there are John Adamases in the United States. This Jan Novák was born in 1921 and died in 1984. At any rate, it turned out a fortunate mistake, introducing me to a marvelous composer previously unknown to me.

Novák distinguishes himself from the pack by, among other things, having gone completely bonkers over Latin as a living language. From the liner notes (written originally in Latin, by the way, and translated, thank goodness, into English), most, if not all, of his works involve either Latin text or classical subject matter. Musically, this results in a cross between Martinu's Epic of Gilgamesh and Carl Orff's habits of declamation. Behind both, of course, lie the towering examples of Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex and Les Noces. Novák introduces a further wrinkle in that he derives many of his rhythms according to the rules of classical quantitative prosody—that is, he uses a long note for a syllable with a long value and a short note for one with a short value, much like the Parnassian composers of the French Renaissance. Thus, the opening of the Aeneid ("Arma virumque cano"), for example, would be long-short-short-long-short-long-long—or so I dimly recall. This generates rhythms that jump and set your toes tapping.

Dido sets the familiar story of Dido and Aeneas to, for the most part, Vergil's text, skillfully excerpted by both the composer and Wilfried Stroh. The opening and closing choruses as well as some narrative linking material come most likely from Stroh. Incidentally, Stroh provides liner notes in Latin, for reasons that escape me. Thoughtfully, he also gives us the German and English translations. Unfortunately, this applies to just about everything in the booklet, including the performing and recording credits ("sonorum temperatores"—recording supervisors—were Friedrich Welz and Martin W—hr) and gives the recording the air of mere eccentricity. The music is too good for that. I'd rate it at least as high as Martinu's oratorios and cantatas.

One hears Martinu as well in the prominence given to the piano in the orchestral texture and also startling, practically unadulterated Stravinsky in his Greco-Roman moods. But originality is overrated. The point is that it's all vigorous, exciting, extremely well-crafted music—in my opinion, as powerful as its models.

Composers have set the classical past in many ways. Purcell sets his story with Restoration swagger and Christian mercy. Poulenc invokes 18th-century pastoralism by Poulenc and Debussy's Six Epigraphes antiques exotic strangeness. We also find the primitivism of Carl Orff's *Antigone* and the monumentality of Stravinsky's *Oedipus*. On this scale, Novák lies closer to Orff than to Poulenc or to Purcell. The music portrays a barbaric, violent world, where choices are few and emotions strong and on the surface. Dido becomes a queen of nervous temperament, great anger, and great sorrow, very much as she appears in Vergil. The music ranges from a rage worthy to accompany great battles and the fall of cities to a pitiable loneliness.

A mini-cantata for soprano, flute, and piano, *Mimus Magicus* also comes from Vergil—this time, the eighth eclogue. A woman waits anxiously for the return of her lover, Daphnis, and tries to bind him to her with spells. The mention of Daphnis as well as the subject calls to mind Ravel. Ravel's classicism owes more to late 19th-century Decadents like Louÿs and Huysmans than to classical sources—an excuse to unleash the forces of lush sensuality. Novák's little cantata races and dances like fever in the blood—much closer to Martinu than even Dido. Rhythmically, nervous dactyls permeate the work, as the woman becomes more and more obsessed with the possibility that the magic will not work. Its psychological astuteness is mirrored in Novák's music—a delight.

The performances are all quite good. Crisp, electrifying rhythm, sharp attacks, and clear diction make or break the music, and the performers deliver. Kurokouchi, the soprano soloist in *Mimus*, covers her voice a bit too much for my taste but nevertheless conveys the excitement and despair of the character. The recorded sound captures the percussive and the lyrical parts of Dido and the intimacy of *Mimus*.

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