



J. Lang: Lieder

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American Record Guide (John Boyer - 2003.05.01)

Josephine Lang (1815-80) suffered the typical life of a 19th Century woman composer: a domineering, jealous father, an unsupportive family, and more than her share of personal tragedy (she outlived three of her four sons). Like Carl Wieck, Lang's father tried to control every aspect of her education, musical and otherwise. When the young Josephine came to the attention of Felix Mendelssohn, he did his best to encourage her and see to it that she obtained a first class musical education, even offering to board her at the Mendelssohn home in Berlin where he could personally supervise her development. Her father refused. After the death of her father she married Reinhold Kdstlin, a professor of law who did nothing to encourage her to compose. As Ferdinand Hiller would later write, "the artist Josephine Lang disappeared before the Frau Professor; indeed, the art of music often had to yield to the art of cooking". The death of K6stlin in 1856 forced Lang to begin her career anew and, with the help of Hiller, Clara Schumann, and Rebecka (Mendelssohn) Dirichiet, she was able to re-establish herself as a piano pedagogue and composer of lieder.

Lang appears to have concentrated most of her musical efforts on lieder, rarely attempting anything on a larger scale. Only a few composers of piano miniatures and songs have established themselves in the repertory, since there is an expectation that a real composer must eventually attempt something greater. But there's a lot to be said for sticking to what one does well, and Lang, in her 150 published lieder, shows us that she was a very able composer. Mendelssohn waxed rhapsodic over her songs, and it is no wonder: she sounds exactly like him. In song after song, the spirit of Mendelssohn is never far. Grace, poise, elegance, beauty, and simplicity are her hallmarks. But Lang is no mere imitator of an established model. As a composer of songs, she's not just like Mendelssohn, she's often (dare I say it?) better Lang's songs have an extra something that all but the best of Mendelssohn's lack, making the elder composer's efforts sound like the imitations. With respect to her exact contemporaries Robert Franz and Robert Volkmann, she is consistently better. If she has a deficiency, it is that she never developed with time. Songs written in 1870 sound like those from 1840.

Serving this good music is soprano Heike Hallaschka's delightful singing. Confident and controlled, her bright pretty voice is ideally suited to the material. She also invests each song with subtle characterization, wisely avoiding the temptation to let them sing themselves. The engineers have captured the proceedings in ideal sound: realistic balance between singer and piano, both surrounded with just enough space to avoid a sense of being too close, but not with so much as to sound too reverberant.

An intelligent essay, reasonably well translated, and complete texts round out the

release. Only the absence of translations for the texts mars the impression of this otherwise wholly effective and easily recommendable recording.

