



J. Novák: Dido - Mimus Magicus

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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 Adamses 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*.