



Portrait Maureen Forrester

aud 21.437

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[American Record Guide](#) (Paul L Althouse - 2017.01.01)

Maureen Forrester (1930–2010) had that rarest of voices, a true alto or contralto, placing her in the company of singers like Kathleen Ferrier and Helen Watts. We don't train contraltos these days. Lower women's voices are almost always made into mezzos, where the repertory choices are wider. In truth, we as a musical culture don't much like the contralto voice, which is often characterized as "matronly". Besides, the mezzo voice cuts through textures better and is more "exciting". In the uncommonly perceptive liner notes, though, Heribert Henrich points out a chief difference between the voice types: the alto employs head voice with little use of chest voice, whereas the mezzo will typically use chest below the E above middle C. That means the alto voice is more homogeneous from top to bottom, even though the upper range is more limited than with the mezzo. With regard to Forrester in particular, we also note her narrow, tight vibrato and an ability to sing *messa di voce* anywhere in her range. Indeed, her excellent breath control, evenness of color, and intonation all point to an almost flawless technique.

These recordings, all produced by Berlin Radio, come from fairly early in her career. The repertory is remarkable, ranging from baroque (Johann Wolfgang Franck) up through Barber, Britten, and Poulenc, whose songs were modern for the mid-1950s. Her ability to scale back her voice makes the earlier music unusually satisfying, though perhaps the best example of her control is in Mahler's 'Ich atmet einen linden Duft' or perhaps the very end of Barber's 'Clocher chante'. To hear what a contralto can do (that a mezzo can't!) listen to the end of Schubert's 'An den Mond', where the melody goes quite low with no change of register.

Forrester achieved considerable fame as a recitalist and oratorio singer, often with more than 150 appearances a year. She would have been better known and appreciated had she done opera. She was not drawn to the stage, partly out of personal choice, partly because there are few roles that suited her voice. Nonetheless, she did make a limited number of appearances, including Erda (the Ring) and Ulrica (Ballo), both at the Met, as well as Cornelia in Julius Caesar at New York City Opera. She also did some opera in Europe and her native Canada.

Her performances with orchestra, particularly Mahler, have been well documented by recording, but the song repertory has been less known, and here she does everything with piano accompaniment. Furthermore, she avoids the chestnuts with Schubert and Schumann; and with Loewe she chooses some lieder, not the familiar ballads. Nothing here is at all disappointing, but I would point to the Mahler and Wagner as perhaps the best of all. This is of particular interest to lovers of fine singing who also want to sample less heard pieces. The sound is quite good, and the liner notes are extensive and very informative, but there are no texts.