George Gershwin: Porgy & Bess

aud 23.405

EAN: 4022143234056

Gramophone (David Gutman - 2019.03.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess

The 'great American opera' continues to cause controversy, on stage and on disc. David Gutman assesses the available recordings.

[…] More remarkable is the recently disinterred German radio tape of Blevins Davis and Robert Breen's famous all-black touring production, again under Smallens. Sponsored by the US State Department, this 'contradictory cultural symbol' reached Moscow late in 1955, albeit losing its initial lustre as original cast members moved on. Even if the 1952 recording is heard today as textually unsatisfactory (provoking the particular ire of Nikolaus Harnoncourt), it has noisy theatrical energy and provides the earliest evidence of the limitless vocal potential of Leontyne Price. Her then husband William Warfield occasionally sounds strained or lightweight but it should be recognised that he was singing from a kneeling position, authentically confined to Porgy's goat cart. The multi talented Cab Callowayas Sportin' Life is a powerful presence too, transmuting the 'dandified' stereotype into something more compelling in his celebrated rendition of 'It ain't necessarily so'. The mono sound has come up superbly. Absent however are such key elements as the glorious orchestral coda of Act 1 scene 1 when Porgy takes in Bess after Robbins's murder. The pivotal 'Buzzard Song' can hardly suggest a world turning to its dark side when it's patched into the final scene. Supporting roles are less strongly taken; the three acts become two.

Flawed as it is, this astonishingly vivid off-air recording conveys the excitement of a classic touring production featuring one of the 20th century greatest voices at the start of her career.

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