

Nicholas Lens

L.I.T.A.N.I.E.S

Clara-Lane Lens, Denzil Delaere, Claron McFadden; The Fourteen Storks Ensemble

DG 483 9745 60:42 mins



Nick Cave describes lockdown as both apocalyptic and boring.

Unfortunately, the same could be said for *L.I.T.A.N.I.E.S*, the vocal work composed by Nicholas Lens to text written by the Australian singer. The 12 litanies are intended to echo a liturgical style, with recurring phrases reflected in the repeated musical motifs. Whereas Lens and Cave's previous project, *Shell Shock*, followed the general shape of a chamber opera, *L.I.T.A.N.I.E.S* lacks a clear narrative – there's no sense of how this music might translate to stage.

Cave has not written a libretto, but rather a dozen disparate reflections on life, death, love and suffering – wrapped up under a guise of spirituality that verges on polite parody ('Love comes to pass / Nothing ever lasts / Never lasts for long / For like an even- / An evensong'). The composer's daughter Clara-Lane Lens's uncluttered, breathy vocals lend an unsettling, dramatic quality to 'Litany of the Sleeping Dream', and the catchy 'Litany of the Forsaken' recalls pop vocals of The xx. There are several meandering instrumental sections, such as at the start of 'Litany of The Unnamed', as well as some enjoyable orchestration – the saxophones and strings in 'Litany of the First Encounter' provide colourful interest. *Claire Jackson*

PERFORMANCE ★★
RECORDING ★★★

Meyerbeer

Romilda e Costanza

Patrick Kabongo, Javier Povedano, Chiara Brunello, César Cortés, Giulio Mastrototaro, Luiza Fatyol; Górecki Chamber Choir; Passionart Orchestra/Luciano Acocella
Naxos 8.660495-97 173:50 mins



This two-act semi-serious melodrama, first performed in Padua in 1817, was the 26-year-old Meyerbeer's first attempt at composing in Italian in a fiercely



Breezy in Boismortier: Katherine Watson stands out as Zéphire

competitive market dominated by Rossini. Like Beethoven's *Fidelio* from a few years earlier, it's a rescue opera with a love triangle between the hero Teobaldo and his new and old loves, Romilda (disguised as Adelio) and Costanza.

The recording was made over three days at the Rossini in Wildbad Festival. The Passionart Orchestra under Luciano Acocella is brisk and well-paced, if a little unpolished; the dense orchestral writing needs more depth and clarity of sound for the individual instrumental colours to glow. The Górecki Chamber Choir is often overpowered by the orchestra.

The international cast offers some old-fashioned, slightly overblown singing. Soprano Luiza Fatyol is an assured, if weighty, Costanza; her dramatic scene in Act II is effective, but Meyerbeer's rapid-fire, Rossini-inspired passagework needs more agility. Chiara Brunello's Romilda is a proper contralto who bravely tackles this difficult role but is occasionally unsteady. Tenor Patrick Kabongo, singing Teobaldo, is blessed with a rich, *bel canto* sound. Giulio Mastrototaro sings Pierotto, the stock peasant with a suitably rustic tone. In the numerous ensembles, individual weaknesses are masked by the strength of the whole.

There is plenty to enjoy: drama, passion, plot and a satisfying ending. But a wider expressive range, with more vocal agility and choral-orchestral polish, would serve

Meyerbeer's fertile imagination better. Some listeners will prefer a full libretto and translation, rather than the scene synopses provided.

Natasha Loges

PERFORMANCE ★★★
RECORDING ★★★

Joseph C Phillips Jr

The Grey Land

Rebecca L Hargrove (soprano), Kenneth Browning (narrator); Numinous

New Amsterdam NWAM 147 62:27 mins



Joseph C Phillips Jr has blogged that 'this particular moment ... does not afford me, an American

Black male, the privilege of being silent about the systemic issues our country has never had the willingness to fully tackle.' Through 13 vivid episodes, *The Grey Land* confronts the lived reality of systemic racism and police brutality for generations of Black Americans.

Conceived in 2011 and given focus by the 2014 Ferguson protests, the opera's completion in 2020 feels timely indeed in the wake of George Floyd's killing and the renewed urgency of Black Lives Matter. Placing mothers powerfully at the core of multimedia testimony, Phillips conveys the sorrow, agony, rage and sheer exhaustion of the struggle while at the same time radiating a shared strength, beauty and determination.

Soprano Rebecca L Hargrove and narrator Kenneth Browning embody all these as mother and son, deftly aided by Phillips's own 28-piece Numinous ensemble in giving voice to a collective cry for justice that echoes through the years. Skilfully blending art and vernacular styles, the composer's 'mixed music' idiom lends sociopolitical thrust to a post-minimalism that suffuses the work with added poignancy in light of the historic neglect of Julius Eastman, his minimalist precursor.

Steph Power

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Puccini

Il Tabarro

Melody Moore, Lester Lynch, Brian Jagde, Roxana Constantinescu, Joanne Marie D'Mello, Yongkeun Kim, Martin-Jan Nijhof; MDR Leipzig Radio Choir; Dresden Philharmonic/Marek Janowski
Pentatone PTC 5186 773 (CD/SACD) 49:42 mins



The first panel of Puccini's *Trittico* (or Triptych, New York, 1918), *Il tabarro* (The Cloak) sits near

to the heart of the *verismo* aesthetic and perhaps represents his darkest operatic statement. With its subtle harmonic and colouristic palettes deployed in an almost Impressionistic manner, the score also offers evidence of his mature style's complete mastery: on and offstage effects are plentiful and imaginative, themselves providing a kind of sonic realism with their siren, bugle and car horns.

In this studio recording, the three central roles go well together, though without being strikingly individual. Lester Lynch is firm and authoritative as the barge-owner Michele, his clipped delivery and heavy presence marking out the character's despondent soul. Given a nervous, insecure reading by Melody Moore, Michele's wife Giorgetta no longer loves him and has moved on to young stevedore Luigi, whose bitterness at his downtrodden condition finds forceful expression in Brian Jagde's taut interpretation; in their best moments both Moore and Jagde find the expansiveness to allow Puccini's phrases to lift into the air.

Smaller roles are all vital and impressively characterised, notably