
Like his widely-hailed Aleko, Sergey Rachmaninoff’s The Miserly Knight was based on a prose work by Alexander Pushkin and created as a vehicle for the great Russian bass Fyodor Chaliapin. Unlike his earlier work, however, Chaliapin rejected the role of the Baron—the avaricious knight of the title—and the work slipped away into obscurity soon after its premiere in 1904. In the summer of 2004, the Glyndebourne Opera Festival paired the dark and brooding work with Giacomo Puccini’s comedy Gianni Schicchi in a performance that was celebrated by opera aficionados and newcomers to the work alike. For those of us who couldn’t make it to the live performances, Opus Arte was on hand to record the striking new production, directed by Annabel Arden.

This is a stunning production in nearly every way. As a way of introducing the story’s greatest but unseen character, Arden employs aerialist Mathilda Leyser as Greed, outfitted in a grotesque costume that conjures up images of medieval armor crossed with modern restraining devices. Her presence, at key moments in the opera, is an eerie and ghoulish one, and makes for a perfect addition to this otherwise male-dominated work. As the Baron of the title, bent on keeping his hoards of gold from his son, Sergei Leiferkus offers an authoritative performance. His twenty-five minute monologue at the heart of the opera is outstanding in technical detail, his delivery is precise and heartless, and he is able to descend into an animal-like rage without sacrificing power or clarity; exactly what the role calls for. Although tenor Richard Berkeley-Steele occasionally falls short in his performance of the Knight’s son Albert, Maxim Mikhailov (as the Servant), Vyacheslav Voynarovsky (as the Moneylender), and Albert Schagidullin (as the Duke, in a great basso presentation) all contribute solidly. The London Philharmonic Orchestra also does an excellent job with The Miserly Knight. Led by conductor Vladimir Jurowski, it provides the sinister and rich tone needed for this work. Jurowski obviously relishes commanding the orchestra in this opera, where it is given such an important role by the composer as the omnipresent dark heart of the Knight.

The production values on the DVD are mostly good. Setting the opera in a dark, damp pit that is the Baron’s money-hole does not always make for the clearest image, but overall the hugely evocative staging and effects were clearly shown, a boon to viewers who are just as interested in the stage design and direction as the music and execution. Supplementary material on the DVD includes a cast gallery and interviews with the performers and directors as well as an illustrated synopsis of the plot. While the cast gallery has become common feature on opera DVDs, the interviews with Arden, Jurowski, and Leiferkus are of real value for viewers intrigued by the work, the Glyndebourne staging, and other aspects of the performance. The illustrated synopsis—which uses stills from the production at various stages of development and includes a voice-over explaining the action and some of the musical language used—is a great addition to the disc for newcomers to the work.

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