

and “I look with dread upon you, elusive shadow of myself.” Spilling over with bitterness and self-pity, the role of Dying Juana is somewhat thankless, although Lopez sings the challenging part with great authority and gives the opera an adrenaline shot when she sits bolt upright in bed toward the beginning and feverishly recalls her childhood. Young Juana, for her part, bursts with ideas and energy, and Becerra’s sunny, youthfully appealing soprano creates an irresistible characterization. During a centerpiece scene, after being accused by her fellow nuns of not believing in God, Juana — in a beautifully flowering aria accompanied by romantic, sustained strings — elucidates her beliefs, which include the heretical notion that part of God can lie in a woman’s soul. Becerra is self-possessed and sweetly charismatic in this passage, as Juana’s dangerous ideas (and perhaps Juana herself) drive Ian McEuen’s Padre Antonio into a frenzy. McEuen, practically trembling with fury, yet filling out long, sustained phrases, is especially good in this violent, driving sequence. Becerra also has a gripping scene with Jesse Enderle, as Archbishop Seijas, who comes to see Juana for himself after word of her accomplishments reaches his ear. Enderle’s sonorous bass-baritone pulses with power and danger during their confrontation. Ultimately, Juana is forced to sign an oath with her blood, renouncing her studying and writing — hence the opera’s title.

Mezzo Audrey Babcock brings admirable clarity and fortitude to the role of Countess Maria Luisa, a patron and mother figure to Juana, and the person responsible for getting her writing published. Babcock and Becerra sing what amounts to a love duet in Act II, another indisputably attractive number that turns into a trio with Lopez, although its beauty is slightly marred by the layering on of heavy voices. Composer Crozier gets a wide rainbow of timbres out of the impressive thirteen-piece chamber ensemble, conducted with verve and confidence by Timothy Myers. The opera can be a little ponderous and self-serious, but it’s unquestionably worthy, with compelling, multidimensional characters. The cast and creators have obviously put enor-

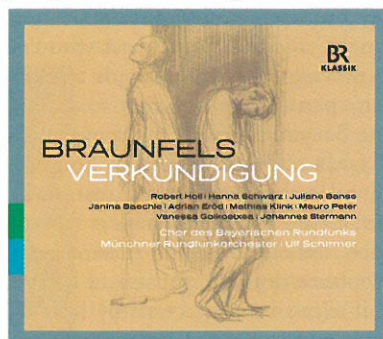
mous loving care into bringing Sor Juana’s largely unknown story to musical life.

JOSHUA ROSENBLUM

BRAUNFELS: Verkündigung

□ *Banse, Baechle, Schwarz; Klink, Peter, Eröd, Holl; Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks, Münchner Rundfunkorchester, Schirmer. German text only. BR Klassik 900311 (2)*

Two aspects of *Verkündigung* are especially striking. One is that the libretto is a Paul Claudel drama, *L’Annonce Faite à Marie*, which is sung in a German translation by Jakob Hegner. The other is that the 1937 opera is almost entirely uninfluenced by Wagner. Braunfels’s musical language has a clear point of reference in Hindemith, with earnest, admirable neo-classical counterpoint and quartal harmonies. It might seem a risky aesthetic for an opera, but any musical language is whatever the composer makes of it, and the language here turns out to be perfectly capable of evoking a life-altering



embrace, a gust of wind, noon in the heat of July or a Christmas Eve miracle. The dramaturgy is also un-Wagnerian, with two of the figures who at first seem to be the main characters disappearing until late in Act IV. But Braunfels has the courage of his compositional convictions, suddenly making use in Act III of straight dialogue and rhythmic speech, presumably to portray class distinctions.

At the center of the opera is a pair of sisters, Violaine and Mara, who love the same man. He is Jakobäus, betrothed to Violaine, but he throws her over when she reveals to him that she has leprosy. (She acquired it in the Prologue, through a single kiss with the architect Peter von Ulm.) Jakobäus then marries Mara instead, while the devastated Violaine spends years living as a beggar in the

woods. Eventually Mara seeks Violaine out after the child Mara had with Jakobäus dies, and in the opera’s greatest scene, the purity of Violaine’s unwavering devotion and beliefs sets the stage for a miraculous resurrection. The scene is carried almost entirely by women’s voices, including an offstage choir, with men only briefly added, not for coloring but for power. The roles are beautifully sung. Janina Baechle’s Mara is full of dark colorings (though she is billed as a soprano), and her voice flows freely. As Violaine, Juliane Banse has what could be called a perfect Eva sound — full of sincerity yet able to show the passage of eight years in vocal terms alone.

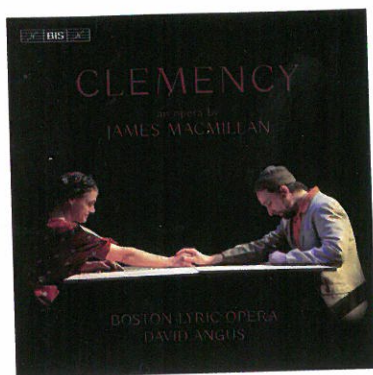
Their mother is sung by Hanna Schwarz, who sounds remarkable in her single scene, even without allowance for the fact that she made her professional opera debut in 1970. Jakobäus, who does the quickest one-eighty in all of opera, then later does it again, is persuasively acted and sung by Adrian Eröd. The father, whose desire for a pilgrimage to Rome is couched in the language of Strauss’s John the Baptist, is steadily sung by Robert Holl. There’s a good tenor in Matthias Klink, as Peter von Ulm, and an exciting one in Mauro Peter, who plays his assistant. It’s all conducted in a calm but relentlessly surging manner by Ulf Schirmer. The opera, though, will never be to all tastes. In addition to the leprosy and the onstage dead child, there’s a libretto in which “breaks into sobs” is an oft-repeated direction, and of which the last line is “Praised be death.” But the cumulative effect is oddly cleansing.

WILLIAM R. BRAUN

MACMILLAN: Clemency

□ *Abraham, Trainor; Kravitz, Ferreira, Levine, McFerrin; Hodgdon, piano; Boston Lyric Opera Orchestra, Angus. English text. BIS 2129*

James MacMillan’s one-act chamber opera *Clemency* had its North American premiere in February 2013 as part of Boston Lyric Opera’s adventurous “Opera Annex” series. *Clemency* is adapted from the Old Testament episode in which Abraham and Sarah are visited by three travelers who threaten to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of the misdeeds of the citizenry. They also pre-



dict that the elderly Sarah will soon bear a child. BLO, which co-commissioned the work along with Covent Garden and a few other companies, wished to turn its production of this fifty-minute piece into an evening of a more substantial length and thus decided to append the early, fifteen-minute Schubert song "Hagar's Klage" to the beginning. Hagar, the handmaiden to Sarah and mistress to Abraham himself, bore Abraham a son, Ishmael, who went on to become the father of the Abrahamic line that gave rise to Islam. In the Schubert song, Hagar grieves over what she sees as Ishmael's all but certain impending death. "Hagar's Lament" (in conductor David Angus's English translation) and *Clemency* are mutually illuminating, to be sure, and it's certainly wonderful to hear the Schubert in any case, especially in Michelle Trainor's gleaming rendition. However, MacMillan says his Biblical adaptation is intended to be modern, not ancient. His own decidedly contemporary score certainly supports this, but the nineteenth-century Schubert song obviously does not.

No matter: MacMillan's opera proper pulses with vibrant urgency. The travelers, who always sing as a trio, announce the impetus behind their mission in a *cri de coeur* that explicitly outlines the ruinous condition of their homeland. ("Those who once ate fine foods now grub in the streets," they wail in Michael Symmons Roberts's effective libretto.) This is followed by a passage of intense chanting that conveys heightened emotion as fully as any comprehensible text could have. Sarah, rejuvenated by the prediction of her impending fertility, launches into angular yet lyrical flights of ecstasy. Soprano Christine Abraham soars through this section with a marvelously impassioned

delivery. Instrumentally speaking, the passage (like the entire opera) is driven by the brilliantly intense string writing, which is given sure-handed, dramatically potent shape by conductor Angus.

The character Abraham begs the travelers to spare the twin towns if they can find fifty acts of selflessness. Then, as one might expect, he bargains them down from fifty to five. By the time he gets to the end, his music overflows with humanity — a striking plea for mercy from one of the great patriarchs of human history. Baritone David Kravitz is magnificently stentorian and resonant — just the kind of singer you would want playing such a towering figure. The last scene belongs to Sarah. The travelers have set off on their potentially violent mission, and she is left with her reveries as she imagines a future full of the contradictions the travelers have implied: "I will sing ... new songs of gratitude and terror, rescue and loss."

Neal Ferreira, Samuel Levine and David McFerrin, as the travelers, are somehow larger than life as a trio, and they manage MacMillan's difficult part-writing with ease. Notice should also be taken of Brett Hodgdon, the highly adept pianist for "Hagar's Lament," and the ferocious string players of the Boston Lyric Opera Orchestra. This is a singularly worthy and unexpectedly gripping new work in an exemplary production by BLO. JOSHUA ROSENBLUM

RECITAL

Patricia Petibon and Susan Manoff

□ "LA BELLE EXCENTRIQUE" Songs by Fauré, Satie, Ferré, Poulenc and others. With Py, vocals. Texts and translations. Deutsche Grammophon 479 2465

The compact disc as a physical object, whether the music is classical or pop, is of interest to very few people nowadays. One response from musicians has been an adjustment to the new climate of downloadable single tracks and bite-sized clips that don't suffer from being part of a shuffle. Patricia Petibon's new disc does exactly the opposite. Her program happens to contain nearly thirty tracks, but they all go together as a single performance, and they need to be heard in the order in which she presents them. The program is at its core a song recital,

but Petibon and pianist Susan Manoff have invited some off-the-cuff participation from a second pianist, a second vocalist, an accordion player and a percussionist. The structure is something of an after-dinner talent show, with relentless high spirits to start, a passing moment halfway through when everybody gets a little soupy and sentimental as the Pernod kicks in, a strategic regrouping for a few big numbers, and one sad song too many at the end to send everybody to the pile of coats on the bed. At times, there's a deliberately amateurish quality. The second vocalist



is Olivier Py, who is not quite a singer (he is quite a director, having mounted a production of Berg's *Lulu* for Petibon), and the percussion parts give the illusion of improvisations that non-musicians might toss in from the sidelines.

There are a few of the French repertoire's greatest hits, by Fauré and Poulenc, but most of the music is unfamiliar. There's a good deal of Satie, including two of the zippy *Sports et Divertissements* (piano only, without the sardonic words). If Petibon is perfectly capable of singing two un-ironic love songs, she nonetheless might separate them with a Satie can-can. But Satie can also have a side that is quietly aghast, and his brief "Désespoir agréable" makes a perfect piano transition into the set of downcast numbers that begins with Fauré's "Spleen." There is a particularly clever transition where Satie's "Grande Ritournelle" for piano four-hands at first seems to be a gussied-up version of Poulenc's song "Les gars qui vont à la fête," but it is the real thing, and the real Poulenc song follows. Among the discoveries are Reynaldo Hahn's "Pholoé," a rare song about aging, and the music of