

Mädchenherzen

Soprano Mirella Hagen and pianist Kerstin Mörk met while attending a Lieder class at the Stuttgart Musikhochschule. They soon performed joint recitals, and quickly recognized a close artistic kinship. For this debut recital CD, Mirella Hagen and Kerstin Mörk each chose favorite selections from the Austro-German Lieder repertoire. At the outset, the songs of Hugo Wolf (1860–1903) predominated. This led to an exploration of Wolf's contemporary, Ludwig Thuille (1861–1907), and then to Thuille's friend, Richard Strauss. Once the repertoire was assembled, Hagen and Mörk noted a unifying subject matter—the world, experiences, and emotions of young women, thereby suggesting the disc's title, *A Maiden's Heart*. All of the songs fall comfortably into the late-Romantic idiom. The Lieder of Wolf and Strauss are, of course, familiar territory. This is my first exposure to the music of Ludwig Thuille, an Austrian composer who taught in Munich at the *Königliche Musikschule*. The Thuille songs included on this disc impress me as very well crafted, with lovely melodies and attractive writing for the voice and piano. Thuille seems to favor a rather generalized, overarching musical approach, particularly in contrast to the mercurial textures and moods of the Strauss and Wolf Lieder (a side-by-side comparison of Thuille's setting of Eichendorff's "Die Kleine" with Wolf's provides a telling illustration).

From the very start of Strauss's setting of "Hat gesagt, bleibt's nicht dabei" from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, *A Maiden's Heart* emerges as the work of two exceptional young artists. Mirella Hagen's ravishing lyric soprano voice, elegant, crystal-clear diction, and sparkling personality create an impact that, in days past, might have been described as "leaping from the grooves" of the recording. It is very clear that Hagen has invested a tremendous amount of thought and preparation into her interpretations. Time and again, she varies her vocal weight and color, as well as declamation of the text, to communicate the song's dramatic and musical essence. Hagen is also a master at using vibrato not just as an element of vocal production, but an expressive device as well. For the most part, she maintains a steady, even vibrato during the course of a word or phrase. But at other times, Hagen uses a "straight" mode of vocal projection. And occasionally, she combines the two, starting with a straight tone, then segueing to vibrato. Throughout the recital, when employing the latter technique, Hagen varies the proportion accorded to each method of production. The trick of course (and one mastered by all of the greatest Lieder singers) is to apply all of these techniques, but have the result sound natural and spontaneous, as if the artist were discovering the song for the very first time. And that is precisely what Mirella Hagen achieves in *A Maiden's Heart*. Hagen's exquisite combination of technical and interpretive mastery, lack of artifice, and captivating charm, is very much in the tradition of another German soprano whose recordings I've reviewed for *Fanfare*, Irmgard Seefried. Pianist Kerstin Mörk demonstrates a similarly impressive level of accomplishment. And it is very clear that these two artists view their artistic relationship not as one of singer and accompanist, but equal collaborators.

The recorded sound, rich, detailed, and with superb balance between voice and piano, complements the performers' aesthetic and high artistic standards. The booklet, in German and English, includes an interview with Hagen and Mörk, their bios, and the original texts of the songs. English translations are available via *Genuin's* web site. *A Maiden's Heart* will definitely be part of my 2016 Want List. Recommended without reservation, and the utmost enthusiasm. © 2016 *Fanfare*

Ken Meltzer