Jiří Antonín Benda: Ariadne auf Naxos – Pygmalion (1996)

1. Ariadne auf Naxos 2. Pygmalion Prague Chamber Orchestra Christian Benda – Conductor Rec.: Chapel of the Brethren, Prague, 7-14.XI.1994.

When Mozart was in Mannheim he heard Benda's Ariadne auf Naxos and thought it was excellent. This very enterprising recording shows us why. Benda's 'melodramas' are spoken throughout (there is no singing), but in them the orchestra develops a glorious musical character in its own right – interjecting, urging on the drama and conjuring up scenes and moods. Mozart soon put Benda's techniques to good use in Zaide, Thamos and Idomeneo. Of course, such a crucial role for the orchestra demands great flexibility from its players. Here they are at their best in moments of ravishing tenderness. When, for example, Ariadne speaks of resting happily on her mother's bosom, a violin solo of quite extraordinary beauty emerges from the warm halo of sound in the orchestra. The moments of high drama, though, lack edge and pace. Pygmalion, which presents an artist anguishing over the nature of art (and which is astonishing for its time), fares better, perhaps because the narrator, Peter Uray, displays a stronger sense of theatre than Quadlbauer in Ariadne. But full marks to Naxos (the recording label, that is, not the island) for giving us these gems from the vaults of history. ---Anthony Pryer, classical-music.com

Jiri Antonin Benda, known in German as Georg Benda, was born in 1722 at Staré Benátky and had his schooling in Bohemia before moving in 1742 with the rest of his family to join his brother Frantisek at Potsdam. In 1750 he became Kapellmeister to Duke Friedrich III of Saxe-Gotha. Gotha had long and distinguished musical traditions, to which Benda contributed, breaking new ground there with his Italian opera seria Xindo riconnosciuto, written for the Duchess Luise Dorothea. There followed a period in Italy for further study which resulted in the composition of two Intennezzi, Il buon marito and Il nuovo maestro di capella, performed in Gotha in 1766 and

1767. More significantly he was largely responsible for giving wide popularity to the form of melodrama. His early and very successful attempts at the genre were written after the arrival in Gotha in 1774 of the theatrical troupe directed by the Swiss actor Abel Seyler, a company which had been active in Hanover and Weimar. For the Seyler troupe Benda wrote his melodramas Ariadne auf Naxos, Medea and Pygmalion, the first two of which aroused the admiration of Mozart, who heard performances in Mannheim and himself planned something of the same kind on the subject of Semiramide. Benda also wrote a series of singspiel for the Gotha theatre.
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