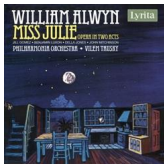


William Alwyn - Miss Julie (1983)



Disc: 1 1. *Beginning Of Scene 1* 2. *Miss Julie Is Crazy* 3. *But The Count* 4. *Music And Dancing Go To My Head* 5. *What's That You're Cooking?* 6. *By God, I'm Thirsty!* 7. *Kristin! Kristin, Kristin!* 8. *Are You Talking Secrets?* 9. *Kristin, Is It Ready?* 10. *There's A New Dance Starting* 11. *You Know Why I Came Here Tonight?* 12. *Midsummer Night, O, Night Of Magic* 13. *Beginning Of Scene 2* 14. *Kristin, Kristin...Kristin!* 15. *Now You Can Kiss My Hand* 16. *That Wouldn't Do Either* 17. *I Have No Time For Dreams* 18. *Did You Mean That?* 19. *If You Must Know - It Was You!* 20. *But You Can Rise, Jean* 21. *Where Is She?* 22. *You Can Come OUt Now* 23. *I Know, I Know...* Disc: 2 1. *Beginning Of Act II* 2. *Never Again!* 3. *What Have You Done?* 4. *I Made That All Up* 5. *Scum On The Surface Of Water* 6. *My Mother Got Drunk* 7. *If I Only Had Enough Money* 8. *Scene: Miss Julie Turns Away* 9. *Has She Gone?* 10. *Class Is Class, And Don't You Forget It* 11. *You've Got A Nerve, After Last Night!* 12. *I Knew I Was Right!* 13. *I'm Ready Now, Jean* 14. *What The Devil Is That?* 15. *What's All This Mean* 16. *We'll Start A Hotel* 17. *Well, Well! So You're Going To Elope* 18. *The Count's Back!* 19. *I Must Be Dreaming* 20. *Kiss Me! Just One Last Kiss!*

Jill Gomez (soprano) - Miss Julie Benjamin Luxon (baritone) - Jean Della Jones (mezzo) - Kristin John Mitchinson (tenor) - Ulrik Philharmonia Orchestra Vilem Tausky - conductor

William Alwyn was his own librettist for Miss Julie, an opera based on the play by August Strindberg. Miss Julie was first performed for a BBC recording in February 1977 (broadcast in July that year). This Lyrita recording boasts an extremely strong cast (there are only four characters), as well as having the Philharmonia Orchestra on top form.

Of all the works I have heard by Alwyn, this is the strongest. In depth of conception and sheer dramatic grasp, it is a remarkable achievement. The score is enormously accessible and beautifully scored. In sheer lushness of sound it brings to mind Puccini (especially when the melody blossoms to voices-in-octaves-at-full-pelt verismo: try the passage when the two lovers discuss eloping to Lugano). Influences listed by the annotator (Rodney Milnes) are Janáček

(ostinati and naturally inflected word-setting), Walton, Szymanowski and even Ravel. The very ending of the work is tender, lyrical and completely romantic.

Alwyn was actually intimately involved with opera, having played the flute in opera pits as well as conducting the UK première of Rimsky-Korsakov's Mozart and Salieri and scoring missing sections of Wolf's *Der Corregidor* for that work's British première. Alwyn first considered Miss Julie in the 1930s. In 1954 he began work on the opera in conjunction with Christopher Hassall, yet the collaboration was not a fruitful one, so Alwyn did the job himself, with a laudable emphasis on condensing the text so that everything makes its point.

There are only four characters. Benjamin Luxon, in the opening scenes, sets out his qualities as a heroic baritone, declaiming Jean's lines to great effect and coming across as superbly authoritative, bursting with confidence. Kristin (the cook) is taken by mezzo Della Jones. Jones is quite a light mezzo (entirely fitting for this part) who finds much expression in the melodies she is given. In Act II she plays the part of the suspicious, jealous lover with real venom.

Miss Julie's first entrance comes in the form of a thrice-repeated call of the name 'Kristin!'. It immediately invokes a much-recontextualised call of 'Parsifal!' by Kundry in Act II of Wagner's music-drama; was such referencing conscious, I wonder?. When she enters, Jill Gomez projects the coquettish flirting of Miss Julie impishly while also portraying her as a character of some maturity. Her 'aria' at the close of Act I Scene 1 ('Midsummer Night, O night of magic', CD 1 track 12) is marvellously tender, mysterious and yearning. Alwyn's spider's web of a string accompaniment is breathtakingly beautiful. It opens out into a Puccinian climax for Jean and Miss Julie. Vilem Tausky paces this important scene to perfection, the lovers' disappearance unutterably tender; Kristin's discovery of the empty stage and her spitting of the word 'Bitch!', moving and yet in its own way amusing.

The same Puccinian fragrance informs the orchestral prelude to scene 2, just before Jean and Miss Julie enter from the garden, Jean calling for Kristin. That fragrance reaches the heights of perfumed eroticism, nothing less, at Miss Julie's cajoling, 'And it's Midsummer Night, if you want an excuse' (alongside the stage direction, 'She challenges him with her eyes'). Gomez floats the high line here beautifully, like some siren luring her sailor to his death, while her Salome-allusions are most striking (Act I Scene 2; track 17, 'Would you like me to dance and shed my seven veils ...'). Ulrik, the final character to enter, near the end of the first act, is sung by John Mitchinson, who does a good 'tipsy', and has a very strong upper register.

The powerful, post-coital Act II shows a distinct change in the relationship of Miss Julie and Jean. Everything unravels in this act, culminating in Miss Julie's leaving to commit suicide. Alwyn cranks up the tension. On-stage, this opera must pose an Everest-like challenge to the soprano, such is the sheer amount of time she spends singing. Perhaps one of the most striking moments is the hypnotic accompaniment (slow-moving strings) to Miss Julie's words, 'Scum on the surface of the water – sinking, sinking – down, down, always down'.

The Philharmonia throughout plays with the utmost intensity, alertly catching the frequently shifting moods.

Each act fits snugly onto a single disc. There are two essays in the accompanying booklet to this release – excellent background to the opera from Rodney Milnes, and 'Alwyn and Strindberg' by Cecil Parrott. In addition, there are some reprints of Alwyn's writings on opera in general and Miss Julie in particular, plus a detailed and useful synopsis.

The time is ripe for a re-evaluation of this opera. Interesting to note that two separate critical sources (Gramophone and the Good CD Guide) both referred to Miss Julie as 'full-blooded'. Rightly so, though, for Alwyn in this work refuses to pull his punches. It is difficult to imagine a more focused or fervent performance than this one; now we just need to see it in one of our opera-houses! ---Colin Clarke, musicweb-international.com

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