Benjamin Britten - Death in Venice (2005)

CD1
3. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act I Scene 1: I have always kept a close watch over my development (Aschenbach)
8. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act I Scene 4: We are delighted to greet the Signore (Hotel Manager)
10. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act I Scene 4: The Lido is so charming, is it not? (Hotel Guests)
19. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act I Scene 6: There you are, Signore, just in time (Hotel Porter)
23. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act I Scene 7: No boy, but Phoebus of the golden hair (Chorus)

CD2
1. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act I Scene 7: First, the race! (Chorus)
5. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act I Scene 7: Measure to fight (Chorus)
8. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act II: So, it has come to this (Aschenbach)
14. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act II Scene 10: This way for the players, Signori! (Hotel Porter)
15. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act II Scene 10: La mia nonna always used to tell me (Leader of the Players)
17. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act II Scene 10: One moment, if you please (A Young English Clerk) - Scene 11
18. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act II Scene 12: So it is true, true, more fearful than I thought (Aschenbach)
22. Death in Venice, Op. 88: Act II Scene 15: Yes! a very wise decision, if I may say so (Hotel Barber)

Personnel:
Gustav von Aschenbach - Philip Langridge
The Traveller - Alan Opie
The Elderly Fop - Alan Opie
The Old Gondolier - Alan Opie
The Hotel Manager - Alan Opie
The Hotel Barber - Alan Opie
The Leader of the Players - Alan Opie
The Voice of Dionysius - Alan Opie
The Voice of Apollo - Michael Chance
Benjamin Britten was a composer far beyond his time, a musician with a genius for orchestration, for intellectually stimulating and emotionally profound operas, and a man who is one of the few composers who has been able to write in the English language and find the music hidden there. His final opera is a tough one, a challenging story (Thomas Mann) translated into a dignified libretto by Myfanwy Piper, and a work that is primarily a monologue for tenor set against myriad scenes that change as quickly as the wind.

When Britten composed 'Death in Venice' he was in his last days of heart disease and though he never saw the opera composed for his lover, brilliant tenor Peter Pears, he did hear the premiere at Aldeburgh on his radio. The opera was first recorded in 1974 with the original cast (Peter Pears, John Shirley-Quirk, James Bowman with Steuart Bedford conducting) and for obvious reasons subsequent recordings feared comparison. Fortunately, now some thirty-two years later there is a splendid second recording, a recording so fine that for this Britten devotee is equal to the original - and in some ways better!

Philip Langridge inherits the near impossible role of Aschenbach, the aging, brilliant, detached 'Apollonian' who through a series of recitatives and encounters with a 'traveler' decides to go to Venice to revive his spirit. Included in this recording is the original first recitative of Aschenbach, a character-defining piece Britten out of uncertainty removed from the premiere (and the subsequent recording). It is now essential. Langridge has a fine tenor voice, perfect enunciation, and he creates an Aschenbach that conveys the tortured downfall of this famous character. He is amazing.

Britten and Piper created Aschenbach's nemeses (The Traveler, The Elderly Fop, The Old Gondolier, The Hotel Manager, The Hotel Barber, The Leader of the Players, and the Voice of Dionysus) to be sung by one baritone. And it is the choice of Alan Opie for this recording that adds great dimension to these changing roles. His is a voice rich and supple and completely able to portray different characters while simultaneously reminding us that they are interrelated and each part of Aschenbach's illusionary view of his world.
Add to this the superb countertenor voice of Michael Chance who intones Apollo in the major scene that contrasts the Apollonian vs Dionysian conflict that is central to Mann's story and the 'cast' of main characters is complete. The many small roles are all well sung. Richard Hickox conducts the City of London Sinfonia with insight into all of the complexities of the score and creates a lush and languid sound that is thoroughly appropriate for 'Serenissima' - Venice. The overall momentum of this opera is devastatingly beautiful, and for one who thought that the original Pears/Shirley-Quirk/Bedford recording could never be bettered, this recording is absolutely as fine and deserves to be proudly beside the other on the shelf. Highly Recommended on every level. Grady Harp, August 05

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