Kathleen Ferrier – Songs of The British Isles 1949–1952 (2005)



Traditional
01 - My bonny lad
02 - Keel row
03 - Blow the Southerly
04 - I have a bonnet trimmed with blue
05 - My Boy Willie
06 - I Know where I'm going
07 - The fidgety bairn
08 - I will walk with my love
09 - Ca'the yowes
10 - O waly,waly
11 - Willow,willow
12 - The stuttering lovers

Quilter (1977 - 1953)
13 - Now sleeps the crimson petal
14 - The fair house of joy
15 - To daisies
16 - Over the mountain

Traditional
17 - Have you seen but the whyte lillie grow
18 - Ye banks and braes
19 - Drink to me only
20 - Down by the Salley Gardens
21 - The lover's curse

Stanford (1852 - 1924)
22 - The fairy lough
23 - A soft day

Parry (1848 - 1918)
24 - Love is a battle,Op15. nº3

Vaughan Willians (1872 - 1958)
25 - Silent moon

Bridge (1879 - 1941)
26 - Go not happy day

Warlock (1894 - 1930)
27 - Sleep
28 - Pretty ring time

Traditional
29 - Come you not from Newcastle
30 - Kitty my love
Kathleen Ferrier (contralto) Phyllis Spurr (piano) John Newmark (piano) Frederick Stone (piano)

These sides are so familiar that little needs to be said about interpretative qualities or such particular matters as articulation, diction and Ferrier's particular plangency of tone in these settings, ones that are mainly folk songs but that also include her art song records of Quilter, Stanford, Parry, Vaughan Williams, Bridge and Warlock. However what does emerge strongly, though implicitly, is the state of the Ferrier Industry and in particular the estate – good or otherwise – of Decca's custodianship of it. All these titles were recorded between 1949 and 1952. They're not presented chronologically though it's often the case that sessions are grouped together in their entirety, respecting the continuity of the original recordings. That will not be unduly problematic; there's no real reason to impose that degree of chronology on a disc that collates the British songs she sang, though the scrupulous may disagree, I suppose.

No, what marks out this disc as different is the restoration and engineering. This has been carried out by Mark Obert-Thorn and I want to draw attention to his statement that previous Decca releases on CD and LP of the studio sessions (there are some broadcast items here) were flat to varying degrees. I agree that the differences between his restoration and the well-trodden Decca releases may not seem dramatic but having made a large number of A/B comparisons with the latest and other Decca reissues [Decca 475078-2 and 475 6291 which is part of a DVD set, and previous incarnations on single LP disc and boxed sets] I can say that the improvements in both pitch and clarity are evident.

A few observations; the piano introduction et seq of I have a bonnet trimmed with blue has greater clarity and definition in Naxos' transfer than in any Decca. In The Keel row the

muddiness enshrined in successive Decca reissues has been significantly improved. Not only that but that dynamic gradients can be appreciated that much better and the pitch adjustment proves entirely necessary. Ye Banks and Braes also demonstrates the efficacy of Obert-Thorn's work. Yes, the shellac crackle quotient is slightly higher than Decca but against that the piano part sounds much clarified and refined. The voice also sounds fractionally lighter as a result of pitch adjustment. With The Stuttering Lovers we find that the greater sense of studio presence of the Decca is counterbalanced by Naxos's brighter piano and voice spectrum.

Both Naxos and Decca replicate that rather strange veiled quality that mars the beginning of Drink to me only but of the two it's the Naxos that marginally has the better sound. In the broadcast recordings of 1952 we find the famous Stanford A Soft Day sounds more immediate in Naxos' hands; the voice is also fractionally lighter than we are used to, as well. Try Go Not, Happy Day for example; neither the Decca nor Naxos can contain the inherent overload and there's still a degree of this at climaxes but Naxos's transfer has greater air around the voice.

The advantages of this issue are twofold. Firstly the restorative work, very necessary and very welcome and secondly the programming. So many recent Ferrier reissues have been all-purpose selections that try to cover the ground – folk song, oratorio, art song, Mahler, Gluck - that they cannot help but seem unsatisfactory. It's good therefore to find a solid and cohesive body of her recordings presented in this way. Frankly this is also a bit of a wake up call to Decca. Obert-Thorn has not had access to their masters, obviously, but has managed to effect an improvement to these recordings - and that can only be a welcome piece of restoration.
---Jonathan Woolf, musicweb-international.com

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