José Carreras - Belle Epoque (2007)

01.Piscatore e Pusilleco (2) 02.Je te veux 03.E l'uccellino 04.Terra e mare 05.Il segreto delle stelle (Blaues Stemlein) 06.Nel giardin' sotto it tiglio 07.O dolce meraviglia 08.Penso... 09.Lejana tierra mia 10.Ai marguerida 11.In the dawn 12.Chanson de la mariee 13.Serenade Napolitaine 14.Torna! José Carreras (Tenor) Lorenzo Bavaj (Piano) Junge Philharmonie Wien Michael Lessky - conductor

At a playing time of just over 35 minutes a CD today has to be something very special to be an attractive proposal. This one isn't! That may be the reason Sony fails to print the playing-time anywhere on the cover, let alone the timing of individual tracks. It seems to be sufficient that José Carreras is singing. So let's start there. Carreras is 61. Presumably this disc was recorded during the last year or so – but we are not told. For the last twenty years Carreras has been a less than attractive singer – enthusiastic but coarse. Is he any better here? The surprising answer is that he is – to some degree. It is true that he has lost the steadiness he once had. He is decidedly shaky when the voice is under pressure. The tone is greyed and less pliant.

Still he is impressively nuanced and careful with phrasing and there is quite a lot of sensitive singing. By sheer coincidence I listened to this disc immediately after the 30-year-old recording of Turandot with Caballé. Of course the voice has aged but surprisingly it has retained many of its old qualities. This also, unfortunately, includes a tendency to be over-indulgent. Whenever he sings with feeling and sensitivity he more often than not mars the reading with insensitive shouting. It is very much a case of "Listen! I am still a star tenor!". Once he was, but he isn't any more. This recital would have been so much more attractive if he had realized his limitations and given us a disc with more restrained singing of some undoubtedly attractive songs. Quite often he is quite sensitive but too often he mars a seemingly well conceived reading by inserting some gloriously heroic fortissimo notes that are much more heroic than glorious. For a tenor of Carreras's reputation a regrettable lack of taste is on display.

What we do get is a collection of songs from roughly the Belle Epoque period (1870–1925), some of them rare. This makes it so much more regrettable that Carreras, with all his fame, wasn't able to be a more enticing advocate.

The Tagliaferri is a nice song, as is the Zemlinsky, neither of which I had encountered before, and Schreker, who is a known quantity as a song-writer, makes a very good impression and has me longing to hear more of him. By and large, though, Carreras manages to ruin the songs by shouting them to death; this in spite of a lot of sensitive singing in between. I just happened to have at hand Nicolai Gedda's reading of Satie's Je te veux, which is rarely heard sung by a man. Gedda was exactly the same age as Carreras when he recorded his version, but even though he also tends to be a bit blustery his is a reading of great sensitivity a standard that Carreras is nowhere near.

The booklet has an essay on the period but no texts and the playing time is regrettably short. Maybe we should be grateful for that since Carreras, for all his obvious engagement, is none too successful in conveying his affection for these songs.

No, dear reader, while I feel honestly happy that our hero is still in reasonably healthy voice, this is only for die-hard Carreras freaks and those who must have everything by Carreras; probably the same people. ---Göran Forsling, musicweb-international.com

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