

### Shadowtime, Ferneyhough

Nicolas Hodges (piano/speaker), Mats Scheidegger (guitar), Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, Nieuw Ensemble, c. Jurjen Hempel. NMC D123 (two CDs)

Lest it be forgotten, Seán Doran did some worthwhile things at the Coliseum, including picking up and presenting the first British performance of Brian Ferneyhough's opera after it had been dropped by Sadler's Wells. That single concert performance on 9 July 2005, following the work's original staging in Munich in May 2004, forms the basis of the present recording, made by Radio 3.

*Shadowtime* is a characteristically complex and ambitious example of Ferneyhough's art, while Charles Bernstein's libretto is a highly intricate artefact in its own right. It deals with Walter Benjamin, the German cultural philosopher who, fleeing from the Nazis,

was turned back on 25 September 1940 at the Spanish border after an arduous walk over the Pyrenees (especially so for a man with a heart condition) because his papers were not in order. He committed suicide rather than return to the fate he anticipated back in occupied France. The border incident, involving his companion Henny Gurland (sung by Janet Collins) and an unsympathetic innkeeper (Angelika Luz), forms the first of the work's seven scenes, and—even though its narrative is already overlain with earlier conversations, either 'real' or imagined, between Benjamin (Ekkehard Abele) and variously his former wife Dora (Monika Meier-Schmid), the scholar of the Kabbalah

Gerschom Scholem (Andreas Fischer) and the poet Hölderlin (Martin Nagy), as well as other material—it's by far the most traditional part of the piece. Thenceforth the work departs much more radically from the norms of conventional opera, with a second scene that is essentially a guitar concerto inspired by a Paul Klee painting that fascinated Benjamin, and later examples that contain choral or vocal music but are more or less meditative fantasies either deriving from Benjamin's ideas or reacting to them. Scene 4, the *Descent of Benjamin into the Underworld*, consists of a Liberace-like performer in a Las Vegas piano bar (Ferneyhough believes Las Vegas to be 'the main portal to the underworld') speaking Bernstein's quizzical text against his own accompaniment, which rises to Lisztian heights of bravura. (Nicolas Hodges's solo turn here falls somewhere between the party trick and the *tour de force*.) Scene 5 returns to drama insofar as it consists of 11 interrogations, those questioning Benjamin including such diverse figures

as Joan of Arc, Albert Einstein, Adolf Hitler (in philosophical mood) and The Two Marxes: Karl and Groucho.

It would certainly challenge any director to make the piece work on stage, though it might be worth the effort. But it came over well in concert at the Coliseum and does so again on disc, even if Ferneyhough's wildly profuse and often fragmented writing will not be to all tastes any more than Bernstein's opaque text. But as an example of belief in the potential of high art to deal with complex material in a complex (yet also, sometimes, playful) way, it doesn't come much bolder than this.

There's an easy confidence about the performance too which, given the minute detail and grand sweep of the piece, is entirely remarkable. The choral and orchestral forces under Jurjen Hempel sound as if they know exactly what they're doing with all those myriads of notes. You're not, realistically, ever going to see a Zeffirelli staging of *Shadowtime* at the Met, but it's well worth encountering on disc—and not just once.

GEORGE HALL