

CD Review –

Mark Richards: *Hamlet*

Hamlet.....Joseph Schnurr
Ophelia.....Meghan Fleet
Gertrude.....Catherine Gardner
Claudius.....Andrew Tees
Polonius.....Michael Uloth
Laertes.....Michael Barrett
Horatio.....Mark Gardner

Orchestra and Stratford Community Choir

Conductor: Wesley Ferriera

Stratford Summer Music 2008

2 CDs

**** (out of 4)

If we had to choose a favourite opera from the international repertory that involved a Danish theme, *Hamlet* would be as good a contender as the Swiss *Un Ballo in Maschera* and Norway's equivalent designation of *The Flying Dutchman*. Thomas' *Hamlet* is too far from Shakespeare, where the Danish element in Ophelia's madness aria proves to be a Swedish folk melody. It is the young Canadian's offering that is much more in line with the literary approach. Richards, who graduated from the Toronto Conservatory's Glenn Gould School, already has an impressive number of works behind him despite his young age – 31. This full-scale *Hamlet*, which he wrote over four years, is his largest work. It was performed in Stratford (Canada) in 2008, from which a technically excellent recording is available, though unfortunately not commercially so. In his libretto, Richards preserved Shakespeare's text intact but adapted it with necessary omissions of whole scenes. There is plenty left, however, with fifty recitatives, arias, duets, ensembles, and not least extremely mood-filled instrumental

numbers that prepare for the next scene – a gripping musical technique which occurs on a larger scale in *Wozzeck* and *The Turn of the Screw*. Richards' musical language is easily accessible, tonally-based in a peculiar idiom, but with clear reminiscences of early-1900 English figures and strangely enough also to a Scandinavian sound ideal. So apparent in the background is Britten, Delius, Larsson and even Rautavaara, and the King's aria (Act 2, Scene 3) clearly evokes Finzi's romantic style. Especially convincing, however, is how the music emotionally evokes the dramatic situations, and where the words are underscored by the music – which is not seen in Thomas' romanticized *Hamlet*. Skilful use of an eight-member chamber orchestra is made to bring a substantial amount of drama to the opera. *Hamlet* holds together well, with the King an erect and authoritative baritone, Ophelia genteelly mastering the finely spun out melismas, and a convincing Hamlet figure who, in order to maintain a balance with the original text, recites three of the crucial soliloquies with musical accompaniment. It is a very attractive musical approximation of Shakespeare's great tragedy, and as it has modest resource requirements it would likely be able to find a place in a Danish context. Thus not needed here is "the rest is silence".

Henrik Marcussen