

sung in German. One surprise is that Violetta's verse is unceremoniously edited away, meaning that we hear Hilden Gueden only at the end of the duet. It seems like rude treatment of such an important and charming singer. A more pleasant surprise is how persuasively Wunderlich renders this music even while contending with as potentially cumbersome text as "O Freunde, so leeret in vollen Zügen." This music was obviously not intended for such words, and in the hands of most singers the result would be painfully clunky. Wunderlich manages to sing this piece with all of the sparkle and exuberance that it requires, to the point where one would swear that this is exactly what Verdi and his librettist must have had in mind. He nearly achieves the same miracle in "Und es blitzen die Sterne," which is the German version of "E lucevan le stelle" from the last act of Puccini's *Tosca*. This role is less congenial for Wunderlich and the aria just does not quite work in German, but this recording succeeds to a remarkable degree, thanks to the tenor's tremendous emotional intensity and a technique that allows him to pour out such a large sound without sacrificing one ounce of tonal beauty. In fact, if there is one lesson we learn from this collection, it is that Wunderlich possessed the clear potential to move into heavier repertoire on the stage. Just what he might have achieved in such a venture remains a maddening mystery.

This collection is not perfect, thanks to a few careless or confounding repertoire choices, but it still offers up a veritable feast of superlative singing from one of the finest singers of the 20th century. If one is already an admirer of Wunderlich, one will appreciate the reminder of what made him so great. For anyone else who has yet to

be introduced to this singer, prepare to fall in love.

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**Ange Flégier—*Mémoires for Bass Voice and Piano***. Jared Schwartz, bass; Mary Dibbern, piano. (Toccatà Classics TOCC 0306; 64:31)

"Le Cor," "La Poésie," "Au crepuscule," "L'Homme et la Mer," "La Neige," "Le Manoir," "À la derive," "Chant d'automne," "Apaisement," "Les Larmes," "O Salutaris," "Je ne sais pourquoi," "Ma coupe."

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Ange Flégier (1846–1927) is one of those sad cases of a gifted composer consigned to utter obscurity despite a career that was both lengthy and distinguished in its day. A man from exceptionally humble circumstances, Flégier's musical talents somehow gained him entry to the Paris Conservatoire and into the composition classes of Ambroise Thomas, where he seems to have done quite well. He worked tenaciously for the next few years and even managed to be a finalist in the prestigious Prix de Rome competition, but fame and fortune proved elusive. It was not until 1880 and the premiere of his *mélodie* "Le Cor" that Flégier finally achieved the sort of breakout success to which all composers aspire. From that point on, he was able to enjoy a comfortable, happy life as one of France's most successful and admired composers.

He ultimately composed more than 300 works over the course of his career, but only "Le Cor" has remained in the repertoire; any interest in the rest of his music pretty much evaporated by the time of his death. Musicologist Hervé Oléon, the writer of the extensive and discerning liner notes for this release, suggests several

different reasons for this obscurity. Much of his career was centered in his native Marseilles rather than Paris, which placed him at something of a disadvantage with Parisian critics and historians. He devoted very little of his time and attention to opera, the genre that might have his sustained his legacy after his death. Most of his music was handled by smaller publishers, including some that are no longer in business, which hurt his posthumous reputation. There was also the matter of Flégier's predilection for setting sentimental texts (including many by his sister) that may have damaged his standing with art song connoisseurs. Perhaps the most serious cause of his quick eclipse is the fact that he died when the French public (as well as much of the world) was enthralled by the witty, sophisticated freshness of such "Les Six" composers as Honegger, Milhaud, and Poulenc. Compared to these young groundbreakers, Flégier and his music seemed as old fashioned and irrelevant as the horse and buggy, and the music world was only too ready to discard them both.

We are fortunate to live in an era in which the rediscovery of musical treasures long buried is more possible than it has ever been, and Flégier seems to be a prime candidate for reevaluation and restoration. Toward that end, Toccatà Classics has seen fit to unearth and release to the public a dozen of Flégier's forgotten songs composed between 1870 and 1897. Six have never been recorded before, and the other six have not been recorded in more than one hundred years. The collection also includes the aforementioned "Le Cor," Flégier's only song to escape the oblivion that has engulfed all of his other works. This release is the public's first real opportunity to

encounter these songs and to assess whether or not they deserve the oblivion in which they have languished for so long.

First of all, it is clear that these songs do not belong on the ash heap of history; they are rich and compelling songs with their own unique voice. One is unlikely to mistake them for any other *mélodies* of the period. On the other hand, it is easy to understand why they were as summarily discarded as they were. In a world captivated by the refreshing wit and sophistication of France's young geniuses, the melodramatic fervor of these songs must have seemed hopelessly backward and completely irrelevant. Indeed, there are moments when Flégier's music seems like something one might have heard banged out on a nickelodeon piano as some flickering scene of villainy unfolded on the movie screen. This was, in fact, old-fashioned music, firmly rooted in another time, and the Roaring Twenties was a particularly hostile time for such music. Fortunately, we are able to experience these songs through the lens of proper perspective, and are in a better position to understand all that these songs have to offer.

Oddly enough, "Le Cor" is probably one of the less interesting songs in this collection! Although it is undeniably effective, it also sounds like any number of similar hunting songs, such as Mendelssohn's "Jaglied," for example. One must skip ahead to the other songs of this collection to encounter Flégier's unique voice as a composer. Look no further than the second track, which features his striking setting of Édouard Pailleron's "Le Poésie," which is a vivid account of Adam's first encounter with Eve and his capitulation to the temptation of sensual delight. The song begins in

stately, reverent fashion as it describes Adam's solitary life. A grand pause is followed by a jarring upward sweep in the piano and jarring chords; this is the moment that Adam awakens to his first glimpse of Eve, who stands naked before him. From there, the song builds slowly to a high, ringing climax that leaves little doubt as to what Adam is feeling in that moment. This song is not an exercise in subtle details, but rather a song drawn in the broad, bold colors of opera, and only a singer capable of producing a mighty sound has any business going near it.

Not all of these songs are drawn from this same fabric. Flégier seems to be at his most playful in two songs that draw upon the Spanish influences that pervade so many French works do in the 19th century. Especially delightful is the swaggering "Ma coupe," a drinking song that bears more than a passing resemblance to the famous drinking aria from *Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas. Liner notes suggest that Flégier may have been paying homage to his composition teacher at the Paris Conservatoire by utilizing some of the same sort of energetic upward leaps and runs that give that aria's refrain such energetic joy. Another powerful influence on Flégier was the sea, and various maritime themes figure prominently in four of these songs. "L'Homme et la Mer" is a setting of a fascinating poem by Charles Baudelaire that explores the mysterious relationship between man and sea, a relationship that can bring pleasure but that so often leads to death. This is another Flégier song that sets a fairly tranquil mood before shattering it with a dramatic acceleration and a much more turbulent melodic line that ultimately takes the singer to the very top of the range. It's a harrowing ride indeed, as though a

pleasant boat ride suddenly becomes a frightening scene from *The Perfect Storm*. It's a terrific example of the composer's ability for spellbinding storytelling in song.

That ability certainly serves him well in his extraordinary setting of René de Saint-Prest's "La Manoir," which describes a heartless and pompous nobleman who takes delight in tormenting innocent people. One night, he is grabbed by Satan and thrown into his hellish oven from which there is no escape. In the last verse, the narrator says that if one passes by the place in the evening, one might hear the faint voice of that suffering nobleman. It is one of those curious texts that tells a truly horrific story with a light touch that only heightens the horror of what is being described. Flégier sets the text in strophic fashion, leaving it to the singer and pianist to paint very different pictures through tempo and inflection. The song ends with an exuberant coda that calls to mind much of the devil's music in Gounod's *Faust* and its sense of fiendish fun. In the hands of a capable singing-actor and pianist, this song is an absolute *tour de force*.

For sheer beauty, nothing on this disk quite compares with Flégier's captivating setting of Paul Verlaine's "Apaisement," which is also known by the title "L'Heure exquise." Reynaldo Hahn's setting of this text is among his most beautiful songs, but Flégier's is perhaps even lovelier (if a tad more sentimental). The notes tell us that the composer loved this text enough that he fashioned three different versions of it. He first wrote it for voice and piano in medium and high keys, and then created a second version that added violin obbligato. Finally, he made a third version in a significantly lower key and changed the obbli-

gato instrument from violin to cello. Because this last version appears to be lost, the choice was made to transpose the second version downward and substitute viola for violin. It may be a case of poetic license, but it works splendidly in creating the moonlit scene described in the poem. Amidst all of the musical thundering that occurs in so many of these songs, these few moments of repose are something to cherish.

The songs have been entrusted to two superb musicians who are equal

to their many challenges. Bass Jared Schwartz, whose fine singing was featured in Toccata Classic's earlier release of Fauré songs for bass, is an absolutely ideal choice for this release. He is the kind of singer who can caress the gentlest phrases yet also swell to encompass the mammoth climaxes that so many of these songs contain. He is a potent and versatile communicator, and one can also sense how deeply he loves these songs. Pianist Mary Dibbern contends beautifully with the accom-

paniments, many of which seem to have been conceived with orchestral sonorities in mind. Further enhancing this release is the aforementioned liner essay by musicologist Hervé Oléon that includes a thorough biography of the composer as well as insightful notes on all thirteen songs. Full texts are included as well. One can only hope that more releases will follow this one, that we might gain an even clearer picture of this composer and his considerable gifts. May he never be forgotten again.

Nature, the gentlest mother,  
Impatient of no child,  
The feeblest or the waywardest,—  
Her admonition mild

In forest and the hill  
By traveler is heard,  
Restraining rampant squirrel  
Or too impetuous bird.

How fair her conversation  
A summer afternoon,—  
Her household, her assembly;  
And when the sun goes down

Her voice among the aisles  
Incites the timid prayer  
Of the minutest cricket,  
The most unworthy flower.

When all the children sleep  
She turns as long away  
As will suffice to light her lamps;  
Then, bending from the sky

With infinite affection  
And infiniter care,  
Her golden finger on her lip,  
Will silence everywhere.

Emily Dickinson, "Mother Nature"

We like March, his shoes are purple,  
He is new and high;  
Makes he mud for dog and peddler,  
Makes he forest dry;  
Knows the adder's tongue his coming,  
And begets her spot.  
Stands the sun so close and mighty  
That our minds are hot.  
News is he of all the others;  
Bold it were to die  
With the blue-birds buccaneering  
On his British sky.

Emily Dickinson, "March"