



M'a dit Amour

Julie Roset - Susan Manoff

Many of these composer names are familiar, much of the repertoire is not. Some songs are major discoveries, others are amusing outgrowths of hilarious and even horrifying lives, adding up to an overall landscape whose most common element is coloratura soprano-writing in its many manifestations. Soprano Julie Roset, best known for recordings of early-music repertoire, describes this smartly sung Debussy-dominated collection in her booklet notes as a self portrait of sorts, 'dreamy but always positive ... enthusiastic and curious about everything'. The literary theme, according to pianist Susan Manoff, is about traversing 'the games of love, deceit, absence, infidelity, daydreams and princesses', plus (I would add) debriefing that journey to a psychologist.

In purely musical terms, the album is contoured intuitively, starting and ending with songs in the spirit of Gregorian chant – Koechlin's arrestingly spare, almost monophonic 'M'a dit Amour' and ending with Mel Bonis in 'Songe (Vers le pur amour)', built on a haunting ostinato. In between, songs are alternately dense, expansive, light and dark, playful and not – though such qualities are not heard where one expects them. Debussy is often other-worldly, but not in worlds so distant as in 'La romance d'Ariel', whose non-human protagonist from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* always challenges the imagination. Poulenc is heard on his best behaviour in 'La reine de coeur'. Enescu is far from his flashy Romanian Rhapsodies in the deeply felt, harmonically straightforward 'Languir me fais'.

Sprinkled in are songs on familiar ground (from Debussy's cycle *Fêtes galantes*) or feel that way – Rosenthal's 'Pêcheur de lune' and Hahn's 'Naï's' – plus solo piano interludes so that one doesn't feel musically unmoored by so much newness. The album's centrepiece is Beydts's song-cycle *Chansons pour les oiseaux*, whose avian imagery might seem inviting enough, though this neglected masterwork is not about attractive surfaces but existential questioning.

The coloratura-writing reaches unhinged heights in the more manic passages of Isabelle Aboulker's 'Je t'aime', which could be heard as the long song of a stalker. This 87-year-old French composer of television, stage and film music – plus operatic adaptations of Eugène Ionesco's *La lacune* and *Leçons de français aux étudiants américains* – is refreshingly unfiltered in ways that make Lucia di Lammermoor seem only mildly mad. Based on the album's three Aboulker songs – including her irreverent re-telling of the Hans Christian Andersen story *The Princess and the Pea* – she could be a major discovery for song recitalists.

Roset has the coloratura technique to encompass it all (and has a grand time doing so) plus exhibiting the courage to not sound pretty when the text calls for it. Her French diction is superb – and meaningful – even when exploring Aboulker's edges of sanity. Like Carolyn Sampson, she sometimes forces her somewhat operatic vocal tone needlessly; her interpretative ideas would be even more clear with a more restrained microphone relationship. Manoff's playing is a constant pleasure, not just in her colouring amid challenging repertoire, but in the support that's always there for Roset. The pair worked on this recital for approximately a year. One hopes that more such musical adventures are on the way.

Gramophone - February 2026

David Patrick Stearns