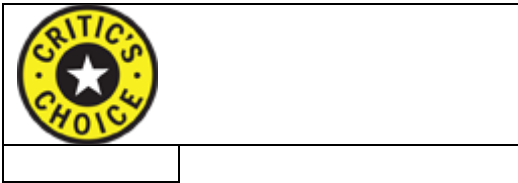


KURTÁG: *The Edge of Silence*

Narucki; various instrumentalists. Texts and translations. Avie AV2408



GYÖRGY KURTÁG earned some long-overdue international recognition after the recent premiere of his first opera, an adaptation of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. This Verdian burst of late-life creativity was unexpected from the nonagenarian—not just considering his age but because a two-hour theater work is positively astronomical next to the musical microcosmos that the Hungarian composer typically deals in. These two lovingly curated portrait albums by sopranos Susan Narucki and Viktoriia Vitrenko (which happened to be released on the same day) showcase Kurtág's collections of vocal miniatures. Individual movements last only a few fleeting moments: the shortest consist of no more than ten notes. But the composer transcends these tiny temporal spans; his settings of aphoristic texts give the impression of stories *in medias res*, as if we were overhearing one snippet of a larger conversation. His haiku-like musical language is meticulously economical, so that a single grace-note or a slight shift in dynamics carries a world of meaning. At the same time, his flexible system of notation leaves much to the interpretation of the singer, who has the freedom to tweak rhythms, pitches and even the order of movements.

For that reason, the three works that appear on both discs are best heard side by side, to appreciate the range of possibilities latent in Kurtág's music. The soloists sum up their respective aesthetic approaches in their album titles. On *The Edge of Silence*, Narucki uncovers emotionally and vocally vulnerable spaces, drifting from melancholy sighs to exhausted murmurs that evaporate into mist. Her performance of the 1982 cycle *Scenes from a Novel*, a kind of modernist *Winterreise* scored for cimbalom, violin and double bass, paints a portrait of a heartbroken woman's descent into despair. Her faraway tone and speechlike execution of Kurtág's wandering arioso conjure the lonely, snow-dusted imagery of Rima Dalos's Russian-language poetry. By contrast, Vitrenko's rendition on *Scenes* revels in the cycle's innate theatricality, which is less pronounced in Narucki's recording. Instead of a tragic *traviata*, the Ukrainian soprano embodies a feisty peasant girl with

her pricking staccato and sarcastic, singsong delivery of folk-tinged passages. While she lacks Narucki's delicacy, Vitrenko backs her cartoonish antics with keen attention to detail—beautifully shaped extended notes, crystalline coloratura, immaculate diction and creative responses to the score's abundant word-painting.

The fatalistic humor of Kurtág's terse style lies somewhere between these two extremes. Narucki, often muffled by the instrumentalists, better conveys this sense of irony in the unaccompanied *Attila József Fragments* from 1982. Each movement briefly flares with passion as she recounts some long-forgotten dream or erotic encounter, only to fizzle out with a breathy, half-whispered apology. Likewise, in *A Twilight in Winter Recollected*, Kurtág's 1969 setting of poems by Pál Gulyás, Vitrenko captures the

Beckettian absurdity of a stood-up lover's endless waiting. Yawning pitch bends and lazy rubato, supported by a softly ticking cimbalom, seem to stretch the second movement into an eternity.

The mixing is far superior on Vitrenko's disc, and the ensemble sounds more rehearsed, but the release only offers a QR code to access the untranslated German text for one piece. Narucki's booklet provides original texts and translations, as well as an excellent liner note by the soprano, who shares some appropriately fragmentary memories of working with Kurtág in the 1980s. —*Joe Cadagin*