

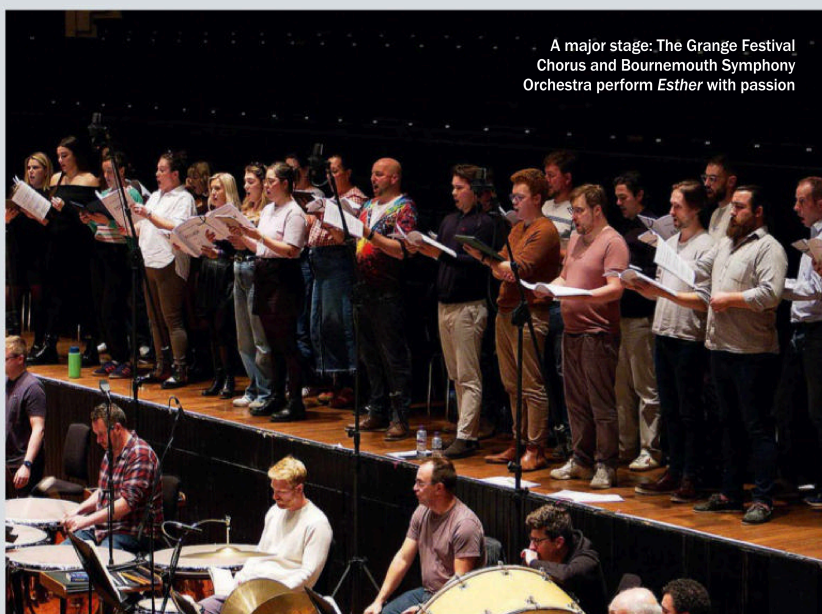
# Opera

## OPERA CHOICE



## A striking rediscovery and bold world premiere

Hartmann's score pulses with moral drama and unrelenting energy, says **Ashutosh Khandekar**



A major stage: The Grange Festival Chorus and Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra perform *Esther* with passion

### Hartmann

#### Esther

Corinne Winters et al; The Grange Festival Chorus, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra/Kirill Karabits *Pentatone* PTC5187424 115:47 mins

Thomas de Hartmann has long been one of those fascinating musical almost-men: a Ukrainian-born aristocrat, trained in the orbit of Rimsky-Korsakov and Taneyev, then drawn into the strange world of the mystic Gurdjieff before ending

up, after years of upheaval and exile, in wartime France and later the United States. That tangled life gives *Esther* an added charge. Begun during the Nazi occupation and completed in 1946, it is hardly the work of a sheltered aesthete; you hear a composer who experienced dislocation and reinvention, and who still believed in the stage as a place of moral and emotional reckoning.

*Esther*, based on Jean Racine's play, sits somewhere between opera and oratorio, but the eclectic score never sounds 'in between': the

drama keeps moving, the choruses bite and the orchestral writing is full of colour and purpose. Kirill Karabits proves a persuasive guide, shaping his forces with conviction, keeping its long spans focused and alive. The Grange Festival Chorus is a *tour de force*, supplying plenty of devotional atmosphere and dramatic urgency.

**Hartmann's work has an overwhelming personality, delivered with shattering energy**

The strong cast catches the intensity and grandeur of the piece. Soprano Corinne Winters is ideal and utterly convincing in the weighty title role; tenor Paul Appleby excels as the Chantre (Cantor), setting the work's moral and ceremonial tone.

*Esther* may be an eccentric rediscovery, but it never feels like a musicological exercise. Hartmann's work has an overwhelming personality, delivered with shattering energy in *Pentatone's* world premiere recording. ★★★★★

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### Bizet

#### Carmen

Adèle Charvet, Julien Behr, Florie Valiquette, Alexandre Duhamel et al; Orchestre & Choeur de l'Opéra Royal de Versailles/Hervé Niquet *Chateau de Versailles* CVSI65

179:07 mins



The 'concept' at Versailles was to recreate the *Carmen* audiences first saw at the Opéra-

Comique in 1875, but it's certainly not the work they heard. The orchestrated recitatives were added after the composer's death; and have all the cuts that Bizet made for the Parisian premiere been opened?

However, it's good to hear this score played on 'original instruments'. And if Hervé Niquet's tempi are sometimes a little wayward after an overture that never really stops for breath, there's some fine playing, particularly from a solo flute, while the bugles that summon Don José back to barracks have a menacing edge.

The disappointments are Don José and *Carmen*. This is the most disturbing song of love and death within the repertoire. But where's the passion? Adèle Charvet's gypsy is a light lyric soprano with none of the mezzo heft that stirs the loins. Meanwhile, Julien Behr possesses all the elegance of a good French tenor, but unfortunately none of the jealous fury of a rejected lover.

The Act 2 duet is little more than a lover's spat and *Carmen's* death is neither tragic nor a defiant assertion of her right to make her own choices. How odd that both singers are somehow better focused in the final scene that is included as the last of the bonus tracks.

The singing honours belong to Florie Valiquette's tender-hearted Micaëla and a suitably swaggering Escamillo from Alexandre Duhamel. But it was *Carmen* that audiences came to be shocked by in March 1875. **Christopher Cook ★★★**

### David Buckley

#### Oracle

Edwin Fardini, Alison Scherzer, Ester Pavlů et al; BBC Concert Orchestra/Jérôme Kuhn *Legendis* 203P007 37 mins