



Gunther Schuller: *The Fisherman and His Wife* BMOP/sound

In certain respects, *The Fisherman and His Wife* picks up where last year's recording by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) and Odyssey Opera, the 2020 Grammy Award-winning *Fantastic Mister Fox*, left off. Both are delightful, 'family friendly' operas based on endearing tales, Roald Dahl for Tobias Picker's and The Brothers Grimm (its libretto adaptation by John Updike) for Gunther Schuller's. There are differences: in contrast, for example, to the three-act structure of Picker's, Schuller's is a concise one-act work whose thirteen scenes total, on this recording, sixty-five minutes. The piece has been performed in Boston twice: by the Opera Company of Boston in 1970, the year it was written, with the composer conducting; and by BMOP and Odyssey Opera in 2015 after his death.

In classic fairytale fashion, the story advances in stages: a fisherman's imperious wife commands that he demand from an enchanted fish, returned by him to the sea, the granting of grandiose wishes, her list progressing from a better cottage to a castle and eventually the request that she be made king, Pope, and finally God (she states, "I wish to have the power to move the sun and moon"). In contrast to his contentment is her inexhaustible dissatisfaction. Eventually reaching the limit of tolerance for such demands, the fish strips the couple of all they've been given and returns them to the basic home (dismissed by the wife as a "wretched hut, no bigger than a vinegar jug") and humble life they once knew, a powerful 'life lesson' clearly imparted. Repeating scenes provide a satisfying structural ground for the opera and also allow for the re-presentation of Schuller's musical materials.

His reputation, as the saying goes, precedes him. A prolific composer, musician (for many years a horn player for the American Ballet Theatre and then the Metropolitan Orchestra), writer, teacher, record producer, and multiple award recipient (Pulitzer Prize, two Grammy Awards, etc.), Schuller (1925-2015) was notable for many things, among them his 1961 coining of 'Third stream' to characterize a musical form halfway between jazz and classical. He worked with icons such as Miles Davis, Gil Evans, and the Modern Jazz Quartet, and in fact the first Schuller recording issued on the BMOP/sound label, *Gunther Schuller: Journey Into Jazz*, features works performed by the MJQ. Evidence of 'Third stream' conspicuously emerges in *The Fisherman and His Wife* during one passage in particular where the orchestra is called upon to improvise.

Consistent with the composer's eclectic taste and omnivorous appetite, the music ranges widely, drawing on classical, opera, and jazz and pulling into its orbit twentieth-century sounds and styles—the work a true product of the '70s in its openness to everything from twelve-tone music to jazz and beyond. Especially deserving of mention is Schuller's orchestration, which consistently exploits the timbral possibilities afforded by strings, electric guitar, harp, keyboards, horns, woodwinds, and percussion. Despite diverse material that variously calls to mind Stravinsky, Bernstein, Schoenberg, and others, *The Fisherman and His Wife* never comes across as a pastiche but rather as an engaging, fascinating, and, yes, accessible work teeming with imagination and elevated by Updike's witty text.

Even though the scope of the orchestration is broad, the opera itself exudes an intimate, almost chamber-like feel when only five singers (and six-person chorus) are featured. Tenor Steven Goldstein is splendid as the put-upon fisherman, as is mezzo-soprano Sondra Kelly as his wife, his confident, clear tone a fine partner to her vibrato-heavy delivery. Enhancing their performances and further amplifying the playfulness integral to the work are soprano Katrina Galka's audacious personification of the couple's pet cat, baritone David Kravitz's stentorian turn as the magical fish, and, in a smaller role, tenor Ethan Depuy as the gardener. (Don't be surprised if you're reminded of Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges* when Galka utters that first meow.) Conductor Gil Rose, BMOP, and Odyssey Opera bring Schuller's single-act piece to vivid life, and delightful moments abound, scene eight's bluesy duet between cat and fish ("For nothing in this dreadful slippery dark is stranger than the fish called man and wife") one illustration of many.

As invaluable as the release is as the first recording of Schuller's work, it's even more commendable for being another distinguished addition to the BMOP/sound

catalogue. Rose and the BMOP are doing incredible work in devoting its house label exclusively to new music; even a cursory scan of its catalogue reveals an amazing repository. Further to that, the physical releases are works of art in their own right. The booklet included with the latest release, for example, enhances its commentaries, bios, and libretto with colour pencil drawings made by Schuller's own mother in the 1930s. Such details do much to make the release the standout it is.

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