

Berlioz *L'Enfance du Christ* op 25

Von Otter/ Cachemaille/ Van Dam/ Bastin/ Rolfe-Johnson/ Schirrer/ Fockenoy/ Monteverdi
Choir/ Orchestre de l'Opéra de Lyon/ John Eliot Gardiner
Recorded 1987; TT 95'25" [2 CDs]. ERATO 3984-25595-2

Even in these enlightened times, Berlioz seems to need defending against charges of incompetence, particularly in harmony and counterpoint, and of noisiness and empty effect - though even his detractors acknowledge his skill as an orchestrator. This understated and quietly original work is an excellent place to start for those not convinced of his genius, and on this disc it is ravishingly performed. The recording also explodes another myth - the one that says French orchestras can't play in tune or with good ensemble. The chording and intonation in the wind is immaculate, even if the recording makes them sound a little distant at times. There is some wonderful string playing too, particularly in the fugal overture to part two, which Gardiner phrases with unforced elegance; the subsequent "Shepherd's Farewell" falls movingly into context. The singing of the Monteverdi choir is everything we have come to expect, and the soloists are uniformly excellent, bringing to the work an operatic drama which complements the restraint of the scoring. It is recorded beautifully, especially the distant "choeur des Anges invisibles" accompanied by the organ. It is a shame that there is no libretto included, and it seems strange to divide part two between the two CD's when parts two and three would easily have fitted together on the second CD. These two minor points aside, this is highly recommended.