David LANG (b.1957)  
Love Fail – version for women’s chorus (2012/2016)  
Lorelei Ensemble/Beth Willer.  
Sung text provided.  
No recording details given.  
CANTALOUPE CA21158 [50:31]

The story of Tristan and Isolde has fascinated artists (whether poets, prose writers, composers or painters) for the best part of a thousand years. I am sure that most readers of MusicWeb could come up with their own list of versions they have found memorable. For what it’s worth, I offer a shortlist of my own (avoiding the excessively obvious): Victorian narrative poems such as Matthew Arnold’s Tristram and Iseult (1852) and Swinburne’s Tristram of Lyonesse (1882); Thomas Hardy’s play The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall (1923), along with Rutland Boughton’s opera The Queen of Cornwall (1924), which was based on Hardy’s play; Frank Martin’s beautiful small-scale response to Wagner, Le vin herbé (1941); paintings such as Edmund Blair Leighton’s The End of the Song (1902), John William Waterhouse’s Tristan and Isolde (1905) and Salvador Dali’s characteristically unexpected Tristan and Isolde (1944), originally painted as the backdrop for a ballet; amongst modern poets I particularly admire the sequence Tristan Crazy (1978) by the late Ken Smith (1938-2003). I suspect that if I were to compile a similar list a few years from now it would include David Lang’s Love Fail (at least on the evidence of my first few hearings of it).  
  
David Lang, (co-founder of Bang on a Can with Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon in 1987) originally wrote Love Fail for Anonymous 4, who gave its première in June, 2012 and recorded it in the following year (this was also issued on Cantaloupe, in 2014) There is a second, more recent, recording of the original version by the Quince Ensemble (on Innova). Lang later made a version for small female chorus, with the eight voices of the Lorelei Ensemble in mind. The Lorelei Ensemble gave the première of this second version in January of 2016. Now the Lorelei Ensemble – made up of Elizbeth Bates, Sonja Tengblad, Sarah Brailey (sopranos), |Carrie Cheron, Christina English, Clare McNamara (mezzo-sopranos), Stephanie Kacoyanis, Emily Marvosh (altos) – can be heard singing the work, in excellent sound, on this new disc from Canteloupe  
   
Love Fail is not, in any obvious sense, a narrative work. It rather assumes at least a basic knowledge of the ‘myth’ of Tristram and Iseult as a point of reference. Lang sets a text of his own devising, made up of passages from canonical sources such as Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur (c. 1476-70); Tristan by the 12th century poet Beroul, a poetic text by Marie de France (fl. 1160-1215); the Tristan of Gottfried von Strassburg (fl.1210); a poem by Beatriz, Comtessa de Dia (c.1140-c.1200) a trobairitz (female troubadour) and lover of the troubadour Raimbaut d’Orange; and Wagner’s libretto (1857) for Tristan und Isolde (these are sung in English versions prepared by Lang), which are intelligently spliced with extracts from the works of Lydia Davis (b.1947), a distinguished American novelist, short story writer and translator. The result reads like a search for the essence of love, an essence not confined or expressed solely within either the conventions of medieval Romance or the circumstances of the modern world, “the excitement, embarrassment, frustration, guilt or competition present in the courtships of ordinary people” (quoted from David Lang’s booklet note).  
  
This is a libretto in which at one point (track 3 ‘dureth) we hear words by Malory – “the joy of love is too short , and the sorrow thereof , and what cometh after thereof, dureth so long” and at another (track 8, ‘Forbidden Subjects’) words from Lydia Davis’ 2006 collection of stories, Varieties of Disturbance – “Soon almost every subject they might want to talk about is associated with yet another unpleasant scene and becomes a subject they can’t talk about […] They can’t talk about certain members of her family, his working hours, rabbits, mice, dogs, certain foods, certain universities, hot weather, hot and cold room temperatures at night and in the day, lights on and lights off in the evening in summer, the piano, music in general, how much money he earns, what she earns, what she spends, etc.”. These transitions across 15 short sections, ensure that our minds are not allowed to remain in a single time frame, to operate within one frame of reference. The experience evokes both the constant shifts in any relationship (enduring or otherwise) and the search for a unifying truth.  
  
Lang’s music operates within a narrow dynamic range, more quiet than loud; emotional expression resides in the words and in the harmonic language far more than in changes of volume. There are more than a few ‘dramatic silences’. The whole articulates very effectively both the joys and the sufferings of love. Character is, on occasion, delineated by stylistic distinctions (both verbal and musical). This is very evident in the opening section of the work ‘He was and she was’. The words are by Lang, “after Gottfried von Strassburg”. The text is in six parts, six ‘verses’ one might say. The first such verse is a series of statements beginning “He was …”. The second part is made up of 8 statements beginning “She was …”. The alternation of ‘verses’ devoted to ‘He’ and verses devoted to ‘She’ continues throughout. But there is a difference, both textually and musically, between the lines about ‘He’ (Tristan, presumably?) and ‘She’ (Isolde?). Compare, for example, the opening lines of the first verse:  
  
he was a blessed man  
he was an understanding man  
  
and the corresponding lines from the second verse:  
  
she was so wise  
she was so fair  
  
Both the diction (‘Her’ qualities are monosyllabic, ‘His’ polysyllabic) and the rhythm are simpler in the lines from verse two and those from verse two make no use of a phrase that might parallel the ending of the lines in verse one – so that line one reads “she was so wise” not “she was a wise woman”. The lines about ‘She’ are more direct and simple in the statements they make. The same holds true of Lang’s setting of the words. The lines about ‘She’ are set in a simple, largely homophonic and beautifully lyrical fashion. The music to which those about ‘He’ are set is more complex in its several-layered canons, sometimes approaching, as it were, the condition of full polyphony. The final verse of ‘he was and she was’ is, viewed from one angle, almost clichéd in its terms of praise:  
  
she was so sweet  
she was so soft  
she was so secret  
she was so wondrous  
she was so charming  
she was so lovely  
she was so good  
she was so young  
  
but the stress which falls on the painful final word, ‘young’, following on a verb in the past tense captures, unfussily, much of that poignancy which is an important dimension of the story of Tristan and Isolde.  
  
Yet nowhere in the sung text is there a mention of the name of either Tristan/Tristram or Iseult/Isolde. It is with two unnamed figures (the nearest we get is ‘he’ and ‘she’) that the listener must develop an artistic and emotional relationship. In doing so, we are invited (or perhaps required) to think in terms of universals (or essences, as I would prefer to call them) rather than specifics. Indeed, the joys and pains, the delights and tragedies of which the libretto speaks could as readily refer to same sex love as to heterosexual love. The stark text of the second section of Love Fail – described as “by David Lang, after Beroul”:  
  
three years  
three years to the day after it started  
it ended  
  
tellingly dispenses even with a “he” and a “she”. The weight of simplicity in this text is perfectly matched by Lang’s brief setting of it (which lasts less than a minute), in which the poignant solo voice of mezzo soprano Clare McNamara is introduced by a short passage played on some kind of hand-held shaker (given the text one might hear this passage as a kind of ticking time piece, a way of stressing the brevity of the unidentified relationship.) Elsewhere four other members of the Lorelei Ensemble are heard as soloists – mezzo Carrie Cheron (in ‘a different man’), sopranos Sonja Tengblad (in ‘right and wrong’) and Sarah Brailey (in ‘forbidden subjects’) and alto Emily Marvosh in ‘the outing’.  
  
The performance seems to me exemplary and I prefer this version for 8 voices to the original 4-voice version – the additional textures and complexities add to the expressive force of a well-conceived (and well- realized) work. The attention to musical detail – however ‘unspecific’ the text is – is admirable. So, for example, in ‘a different man’ (the text of which, taken from Lydia Davis’ Varieties of Disturbance (see above) – speaks of a man who is “at night” pale and gray, but “in the morning” is “a rosy king, gleaming”. The intermittent, very gentle sounding of a small bell, suggestive of a chiming clock, beautifully complements the text and the vocal line. On some other tracks very discrete use of percussion is evident – perhaps played by members of the choir, since no other musicians are named – and there is one purely instrumental piece (track 10 ‘break # 2).  
  
Through its musical hints of both the medieval and the minimalist, and of late romantic harmony, as well as its trans-temporal text; in its achieved balance of simplicity (whether textual or musical) and complexity, Love Fail is a remarkable work which interweaves different times and a range of emotions – from ecstasy to desolation, hope to loss, pain to pleasure. There have been both staged performances of the work (which might, I suspect, make it difficult to convey satisfactorily the intercutting of the medieval and the modern) and concert performances. When it is sung and recorded as beautifully as it is here, Love Fail doesn’t, I think, lose anything by simply being heard, preferably with the text (which is provided) in one’s hands. Artistic Director and Conductor of the Lorelei Ensemble Beth Wilder, deserves praise too, for overseeing a performance precise and poetic in equal measure.  
  
A beautiful contemporary work which explores the complexity of human relationships with both delicacy and strength. Full appreciation of it needs careful attention – attention which is richly rewarded.  
  
Glyn Pursglove

An inventive text and some beautiful music; this, surely, is a work which will endure.

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