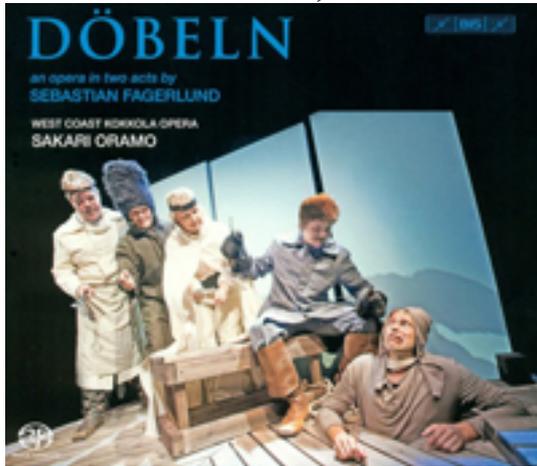


FAGERLUND: *Döbeln*

□ *Komsi, Mylläri; Lillkung, Penttinen, McCloud; Kokkola Opera Festival Orchestra, Oramo. Text and translation. BIS SACD-1780*



Döbeln, commissioned by the West Coast Kokkola Opera of Finland, is the first opera by composer Sebastian Fagerlund (b. 1972). The central character, General Georg Carl von Döbeln, was a participant in the 1808–09 war in Finland between Sweden and Russia. Jusa Peltoniemi's libretto finds the general on the operating table with a head wound — one the historical Döbeln actually suffered — and uses this situation to frame a series of increasingly fantastic dreams.

The booklet makes much of the "feeling of drama" in Fagerlund's earlier, non-operatic works, though an instrumental composer's theatrical bent doesn't necessarily translate to a flair for opera. Indeed, *Döbeln* incorporates some stock gestures of "modern" composition, including a preference for using rhythmic patterns, rather than harmonic or melodic ones, to generate a sense of shape and destination, as well as a reliance on winds and particularly percussion for coloristic effects, relegating the one-to-a-part strings to a secondary role. The bilingual libretto — scenes are sung in Swedish or Finnish, depending on the context — takes in some gender-bending: Döbeln's dream-counterpart is a soprano, as is the (historically male) traitor, Sprengporten.

On the other hand, while the writing is basically non-tonal — short phrases and fragments do temporarily find key-centers — it doesn't rely purely on harsh dissonances for effects. And Fagerlund has a good feeling for texture: the contrast between the busy activity of the fevered dream sequences and the static, subdued motion of the framing story provides needed variety over the opera's length. While it's unlikely that Fagerlund's score will become a "phonograph opera" in the way of, say, *Peter Grimes* or even (at a stretch) *The Rake's Progress*, I suspect that, with modern staging and scenic techniques, it's an effective theater piece.

Fagerlund, also like some of his contemporaries, assigns to the voices essentially instrumental effects, such as pitch-bends, but otherwise his writing for the voice is mostly grateful. He likes to keep the sopranos "parked" in a

highish tessitura: fortunately, the two women here — Anu Komsu and Annika Mylläri, who cover five roles between them — both have shiny, brilliant tops. Mylläri is the more varied: her Sprengtporten is solid and deep, her Act II entry as Madame cutting and incisive. Komsu's "dream Döbeln" sounds tentative in her few low-lying phrases. Lasse Penttinen acceptably distinguishes his three roles and their emotional states but produces a fair amount of white, pallid tone in the process. Where he allows some warmth into his tenor, as at the end of King Gustav's Act I scene, the sound is lovely. Sören Lillkung's baritone turns shouty at the top of Döbeln's music, even in his otherwise expressive Act II aria. In the dream scenes where Döbeln has been transformed into a burbot — a surrealistic touch that is unclear in intent — he adopts a narrow, throttled character voice that is no great pleasure to hear, though it was probably effective in the actual production. What sounds like a fearsome beat in Robert McLoud's bass, as the Field Surgeon, may be deliberate pitch-bending; he intones the broad lines in the "Struggle" scene nicely.

It's hard to judge the conducting of an unfamiliar score of this sort, but the singers' rhythmic alertness in the Act I quartet reflects well on Sakari Oramo's preparation. Bis's usual exemplary engineering enhances the orchestral sound with a subtle ambience that keeps the textures clear while giving the voices their due. □

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