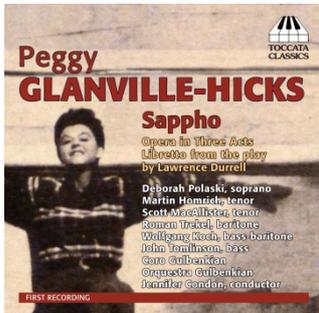


Glanville-Hicks Sappho. *New*

Deborah Polaski (soprano) Sappho; **Martin Homrich** (tenor) Phaon; **Scott MacAllister** (tenor) Pittakos; **Roman Trekel** (baritone) Diomedes; **Wolfgang Koch** (bass-baritone) Minos; **John Tomlinson** (bass) Kreon; **Jacquelyn Wagner** (soprano) Chloe/Priestess; **Bettina Jensen** (soprano) Joy; **Maria Markina** (mezzo) Doris; **Laurence Meikle** (baritone) Alexandrian; **Coro e Orquestra Gulbenkian/Jennifer Condon.**

Toccat Classics TOCC0154-55 (full price, two discs, 2 hours 8 minutes). English libretto included. Website www.toccatclassics.com *Engineers* Pierre Lavoix, Thibaut Maillard. *Dates* Live performances in the Grande Auditório, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon on July 10th-12th, 2012.



When Australian-born Peggy Glanville-Hicks died in 1990, the *New York Times* listed her opera *Sappho* (1963) as one of her three 'best-known scores'. It was a poignant error.

Although *Sappho* was arguably the climax of her composing career, in fact it had never been performed, except for the final monologue, until this recording. The opera had been commissioned by the San Francisco Opera, through a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, for Maria Callas; but General Director Kurt Adler – who had praised the libretto for 'the most beautiful use of the English language of any operatic text I have come across' – turned it down as soon as he saw the piano score. That is perhaps not surprising, since *Sappho* was a radical work that went against expectations, inhabiting a world so far from the mainstreams of the time that it must have been hard to find points of orientation against which to hear it.

When I call it radical, I don't mean to suggest that it participated in what we might paradoxically call the established avant-garde temperament of the 1960s. Although the work has nothing in common with such conservative contemporaries as Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*, it doesn't have much in common with such iconic shockers of the time as Berio's *Sinfonia* or Penderecki's *St. Luke Passion* either. *Sappho* savours elusiveness at a time when direct provocation and excess were highly prized. To the extent that it's radical, it's because it follows its own path, with an idiom that has some of its roots in non-Western practices. In this melding of multiple traditions, it has something in common with the music of such outsiders as Lou Harrison; but even those connections are loose, and *Sappho* has a faux-archaic flavour largely its own.

What does it sound like? The music is not quite ritualistic in the sense that, say, Stravinsky's *Oedipus* is ritualistic: *Sappho*'s music is rhythmically more fluid and harmonically far less stony. Still, *Sappho* creates a mood of temporal displacement, in part through its modal inflections, in part through the patience with which it makes its points, in part through its sensitively glowing (but distinctly unflashy) orchestration. (In her contribution to the excellent programme booklet, the conductor Jennifer Condon suggests that the inadequacy of the piano score is 'largely the reason for so many years of neglect' – and there's little doubt that, stripped of its colours, the music would lose much of its power.) The score is far in spirit from the early classics of American minimalism (say, early Reich), but it does exhibit a similar distrust of traditional romantic procedures, producing effects that can seem superficially static.

The spare textures contribute greatly to the music's special flavour as well. Glanville-Hicks is ready to draw back the orchestra at emotionally heightened moments, sometimes silencing it entirely, more often distilling the accompaniments to gentle brush-strokes that shade the temperament of the moment. Rarely does the orchestra compete with the singers (although, when it does, as Condon suggests, Wagnerian singers are no disadvantage); and even in purely orchestral passages (for instance, the opening to the second scene), the music can be reduced to a unison or a single line over a sustained backdrop. All in all, it wouldn't be unfair to use the word 'reserved' as a shorthand to describe the overriding aesthetic here. While *Sappho* is a big work, with some large-scale climaxes, the opera doesn't strive to overwhelm: even at its most outgoing, its aims are subtler and more inward. Characteristic of its outlook is the choral welcome for the victorious General Pittakos that opens Scene 4. Such a moment might have brought forth brash spectacle from Verdi; in Glanville-Hicks's hands, the passage exhibits something more troubling, more shadowy, more eerily threatening.

For all its detailed verbal felicity (not necessarily a virtue in an operatic text), the libretto, based on a play by Lawrence Durrell, similarly runs against the grain. On the surface, it appears at first to have all the trappings of grand opera: adultery, murder, incest, betrayal, suicide. Most of those standard elements, however, are treated in a slightly oblique fashion. It's not simply that there's more attention to the psychological reactions than to the events themselves. More important, even those reactions are, for the most part, oddly muted. There's little anger or bitterness or ranting here; compassion takes over where we might expect confrontation. The characters are all, in their different ways, aware of ageing; and regret and disenchantment trump such emotions as eros and vengeance as the driving forces of the action. In sum, if you're looking

for a heightened return to the classical world in the manner of *Elektra* or even Tippett's *King Priam*, you might find *Sappho* on the diffident side. If, however, you're willing to let the music work its hypnotic powers on you, you'll find yourself caught.

This premiere is an act of commitment by the 30-year-old conductor, who has been working since 2001 to bring this work to the world, and who is responsible for deciphering the manuscript of the full score to make this performance possible. Her dedication is palpable from the first note to last and she's fortunate to have been able to secure a first-rate set of world-class singers to participate – and even to do so without compensation. Pride of place goes to Deborah Polaski, who moves from Brünnhilde and Elektra to this very different role, one that still, in moments, calls on Herculean strength, but that depends far more heavily on a sinuous quiet and intimacy.

Polaski may not have the focused power she had in her glory years, but her performance here is captivating in its musical nuance and verbal awareness, and her final monologue will leave you haunted.

John Tomlinson, of course, has similar Wagnerian credentials – and he is similarly persuasive, eloquently tracing the emotional eddies of Sappho's husband, Kreon, a 'man who is tormented' by his past. He sings his big Act 3 confession with the same kind of depth and tenderness he brings to 'Wotan's Farewell'. Yet another distinguished Wagnerian, the dark-toned Wolfgang Koch, gives a textually attentive performance as Sappho's tutor Minos; and Roman Trekel is superb as the 'poet and witty drunkard' Diomedes, singing with an astonishing range of colour and artfully navigating from the nearly burlesque comedy of the first act to the despair of the third, where, dying from self-administered poison, he comes to terms with his desires for his son's wife.

The less familiar singers are expert, too. Martin Homrich glows as Phaon, a poet whose turn to the simple life serves as a kind of siren call to Sappho (his duet with Sappho at the end of the first act is unbearably poignant.) Scott MacAllister is just as good in the more heroic role of Phaon's twin brother Pittakos, a general (and former lover of Sappho's) who is just beginning to recognize the emptiness of his military victories. The entire cast boasts excellent enunciation, especially important in an opera that relies so heavily on textual detail. The orchestra coaxes out the music's understated effects expertly (listen, for instance, to the wailing of the strings beginning a minute or so into Scene 5 or to the keening solo winds throughout).

All in all, a major contribution to the catalogue, served up with Toccata's usual high-quality presentation values; the engineering is solid, too. Strongly recommended to any opera lover with a sense of adventure.

Peter J. Rabinowitz