



IRR
OUTSTANDING

Frank Martin's ballet based on the Cinderella story was first performed in

1942, conducted by Paul Sacher. In spite of its enthusiastic reception it seems not to have been performed since, and this is its first recording. You must snap it up while you can.

It is scored for an unusual combination of ten instruments, plus strings and four singers. A booklet essay by Jacques Tchamkerten provides a useful introduction to the composer and to the work, otherwise known as *Das Märchen vom Aschenbrödel*, as well as a synopsis. You can read this in English, French or German, the performers' details too, but there is no English translation of the texts, which are sung in German, and the track list, corresponding to the different numbers of the ballet, is given in German only.

A Messenger sets the scene. Cinderella's mother has died and her father's new wife has brought with her two other daughters, beautiful on the outside, but ugly in their hearts. They dance to music heavily influenced by jazz, and we learn from the booklet that Martin felt that introducing jazz style was an appropriate way of portraying their character. (I'm not sure I follow his reasoning though, either in English or in French.) The Stepmother arrives to a portentous trombone, whereas the profound melancholy and – said Martin – humility of Cinderella is conjured up by the oboe. When the invitation to the Prince's ball arrives the music is wildly festive, but there is throughout a darkness to the score, the sickness at the heart of the rose, that will be familiar to those who know Martin from such masterly works as *Der Cornet*. Listen to the magical bare fifths, though, at the end of the act, as the fairy's spell clothes Cinderella in her royal ball finery.

The music for the ball is now animated and splendid, now tentative and uneasy, making the listener eager to see the work on the stage. When the sisters dance with the Prince the music is even more sinuously jazzy than before, positively unclean. This is the moment to draw attention to the outstanding orchestral playing. These are students, albeit students nearing the end of their studies, but no one listening blind could ever suspect that it was anything other than a fine professional group. The work is superbly paced by Gábor Takács-Nagy. Cinderella and the Prince dance to a beautiful viola and cello duet, and if you want to know the exact instant the two fall in love I'm willing to bet it's at track 16, 1'02". But the clock strikes 12, to music uncannily representing Cinderella's hurried departure. (There is no reference to a pumpkin. On the other hand, this version of the story does have its unexpected side. Two

doves appear in Act 1, for example, and their role in enabling Cinderella to go to the ball – it involves lentils – is deliciously portrayed in the music.)

Sinister counterpoint opens Act 3, as the voices remind us that the Prince has vowed to marry the one whose foot fits the golden slipper left behind as she fled the ball. She has not yet been found, so the sisters have one last chance. Cue more birds, and the moment is quintessentially Martin, funny and deeply sinister at the same time. The elder sister cuts off her toe in an attempt to make the slipper fit. 'Rucke di guck!', sing the birds, to a rhythm that stubbornly refuses to leave your head once it's in there. 'There's blood in the slipper!' When the right foot is found, however, the birdsong attains near-ecstatic radiance.

All the characters are shared out between the four singers, who also come together as birds and, from time to time, to provide some brief commentary on the action. The singing is uniformly fine, bringing much pleasure. But this is not an opera, and most of the action is danced and therefore left to the listener's imagination.

If the idea of a Cinderella ballet leads you to imagine a tinselly piece of light-hearted, empty-headed nonsense, you must think again. Frank Martin didn't really do light-hearted. Those who have already caught the Martin bug will need no encouragement from me to acquire this virtually unknown work. If you are new to the composer, it will do very well as a start. But beware! This is music that haunts the mind. It might even keep you awake. As in the best fairy stories, horror is never really far away. 'Rucke di guck!'.

William Hedley