

Christian Bährens

SHAKESPEAREAN WOMEN

Eight Musical Evocations for Female Choir or Sextet (SSSAAA)



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Norsk Musikforlag (Oslo)

ISMN 979-0-065-16904-0

78 pp. – 199 NOK (ca. 17 €)



NORSK MUSIKFORLAG

Berlin choir director and composer Christian Bährens (born 1958) had the wonderful idea of dedicating a choral piece to each of the well-known female characters from Shakespeare's plays and combining them into an eight-part cycle. Female characters from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" are represented. Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, and Romeo and Juliet, all of whom have very different characters, find themselves in very different situations, dreaming, conjuring.

The elves who open the cycle, guarding Titania's summer night's sleep, scare away chromatically creeping worms and spider legs with rhythmically accented "Ks" and "Ksch." Only the nightingale is allowed to approach in the refrain with a "Lullaby." The Fairie's "Over Hill, over Dale" floats light-footedly along in a flowing 6/8 time, a beautiful homophonic phrase with a very Old English feel. In contrast, Lady Macbeth, conjuring up evil spirits, advances with harsh second intervals.

In a menacingly low register, their invocation can be heard in unison, interrupted by brief clusters of sparks. Gertrude's recitative-like account of Ophelia's drowning is followed by Desdemona's "Willow Song": two voices become like two instruments added to the choir part on "hoo," creating a beautiful vocal color effect. With its simple structure, this song is very effectively placed at the center of the cycle.

For the famous "Double Toil and Trouble" scene featuring the witches from Macbeth, Bährens chooses a tonal scale in which rhythmic patterns combine to create a wild scene, accompanied by witch-like cackling. Glissandi and bubbling sounds complete the musical concoction. Two more choral songs follow, Helena and Julia, which are similar in style and gentle in tone.

All eight choral pieces in English are set for six female voices, which allows the composer to spice up the usual harmonies with friction, suspensions, and surprising effects. But don't be afraid of diffuse chords; the supposed six-part harmony often ends in unison, two-part, or three-part harmony. Homophonic phrasing and voice-friendly melodies reveal the choir director as a composer. The female vocal registers are not pushed to their limits, giving the individual pieces a warm, effortless sound – with the exception of "Double Toil and Trouble."

The cycle was dedicated to the Norwegian women's choir Concentus, and its stylistic proximity to Scandinavian choral music is unmistakable. Women's choirs with a penchant for Shakespeare will enjoy these pieces.

Sabine Wüsthoff in „CHORZEIT“ - March 2025