



## ORDWAY The Outer Edge of Youth

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I'd describe the music of Scott Ordway's quite beautiful 2020 choral opera *The Outer Edge of Youth* as a blend of Britten and Arvo Pärt with a dollop of Eric Whitacre, perhaps (I'm thinking of the latter's *Lux aurumque*). This is not to suggest that Ordway is cribbing in any way or lacking in originality, but simply to convey a sense of its style.

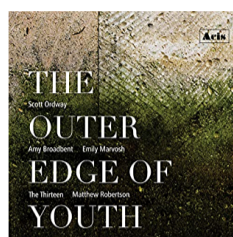
The story (the composer's own, as is the libretto) concerns Sebastian and Nicholas, two boys 'at the very end of childhood', who enter a forest and find they're able to understand birdsong. Guided by the birds, they witness the wedding of two foxes, experience the magical beauty of a hidden apple orchard, and then come upon a bear caught in a trap with two cubs at her side. Unable to bear the sight of such suffering, they angrily question the birds, who explain that their compassion is part of what makes them human. Sebastian runs off but Nicholas begs to be transformed into a bird in order to be free of the pain his humanity carries with it. The birds comply, and Sebastian is left to ponder his friend's fate.

The libretto is effective, though at times I wished Ordway had been more concise. On the other hand, this is as much a contemplative work as a dramatic one, and the composer deftly balances these two seemingly opposing aspects. Some of the effects are especially striking – when the birds first speak to the boys (track 3), for example, their voices seem to throb like flapping wings; the wondrous simplicity of the foxes' wedding procession (track 5, starting at 1'29"); and the Pérotin-like polyphony that introduces the final scene (track 20).

The score calls for a small choir (eight voices) and an instrumental quartet (three cellos and a double bass), along with a soprano (who portrays Sebastian) and an alto (Nicholas). The performance here by The Thirteen is exquisite in every way, from the purity and blending of the choral singing to the passionate characterisations of the two soloists. Conductor Matthew Robertson's pacing is faultless, and he shows how silences and breaths are as important in this music as the notes themselves. The recording, made in the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in



Author: Andrew Farach-Colton



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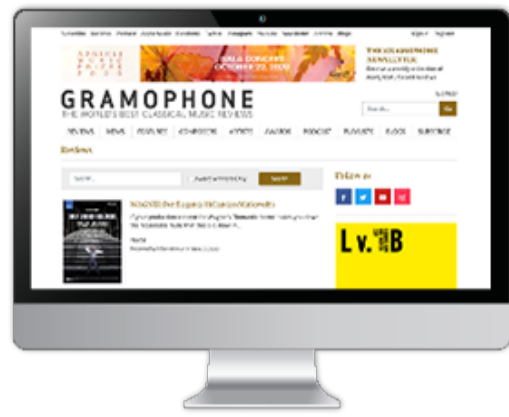
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