SOMNIA • ZEFIRO TORNA; Jurgen De bruyn (lt); Lore Binon (vn, sop) • EVIL PENGUIN 0076 (54:16)

TRAD ***Schlof mein Kind. Bressarello.*** **AFONSO** ***Canção de Embalar.*** **TRAD/DE VISÉE** ***Black is the color of my true love's hair. Passacaille*** **in d. WILLIAM WEBB** ***Pow'rful Morpheus, let thy charms.*** **DOWLAND** ***In darkness let me dwell.*** **MOULINIÉ** ***O stelle homicide.*** **PILKINGTON** ***Rest, sweet nymphs.*** **ANON** ***The dark is my delight.*** **KAPSBERGER** ***Figlio dormi. Toccata Seconda Arpeggiata.*** **ALESSANDRO SCARLATTI** ***Il Pompeo:*** *O cessate di piagarmi.* **MERULA** ***Canzonetta spirituale sopra alla nanna:*** *Hor ch'è il tempo di dormire.* **MICHELAGNOLO GALILEI/T. S. ELIOT** ***Toccata/Four Quartets:*** *III (excerpt).* **HUYGENS** ***Aubade (J'ai veu le point du jour)***

The blurb for this disc is good, but the disc is much, much better. "Close your eyes and surrender to Hypnos, god of sleep," we are instructed. More: "ZEFIRO TORNA pours a hallucinatory elixir of dreams, solitude, secret fantasies, and soothing whispers … Lean back and drift away into …. Somnia." And that's omitting the bit about Lore Binon's "enchanting" voice piercing the darkness, "... carried away by Jurgen De bruyn's theorbo and lute." For yes, ZEFIRO TORNA is an ensemble that comprises Binon (soprano, violin) and De bruyn (specifically archlute, theorbo, and Baroque guitar).

Gods and goddesses abound here: Hypnos (sleep), Nyx (night), Erebus (darkness), Morpheus (sleep), and Thanatos (death). So does magic: these performances are faultless, and so is the realization of concept. The music presented centers on the Renaissance and the Baroque but expands to include traditional from a variety of geographical locations and even music of our time.

It is with a Yiddish folksong we begin, *Schlof mein Kind* (Sleep, my child), of glorious, poignant simplicity. Binon's voice is so pure here: the perfect example is the final note, the diminuendo perfectly calibrated. Another song of unknown authorship follows: *Bressarello*. Binon and De bruyn are perfect equals, and as the music (slightly) animates in this song, the two musicians do so in perfect parallel. And straight to our times, and to Portugal: a famous song by José (Zeca) Afonso, *Canção de Embalar* (Lullaby). Poignant though Afonso's own recording is, Binon and De bruyn make the song their own and, dare I say it, out-Afonso Afonso. The two voices are complementary: Afonso's tremulous in a vulnerable way, Binon's directly of Early Music lineage, so the music strikes the heart just as much, but wrapped as a post-Dowland lute song.

It is wonderful to hear *Black is the color of my true love's hair* here. Could any arrangement be as powerful as Berio's in his 1964 *Folk Songs*? Could any singer be as poignant as Cathy Berberian? Surprisingly, ZEFIRO TORNA tells us the answer is yes: starting as a confidence, the music turns into whisper, every nuance perfectly captured by Evil Penguin's demonstration-standard recording (Steven Maes and Felicia Bockstael, Engineer and Musical director/Editor). This track closes with Robert de Visée's *Passacaille* in D-Minor, with overlaid vocalise, an incredibly imaginative, and effective, twist. It segues nicely into William Webb's *Pow'rful Morpheus, let thy charms*. Webb lived *c*. 1600–1657, penning early English lute songs, and how beautifully the musicians capture *Morpheus*' essence, Binon's short diminutions ideal. She plays violin here, too, with deep, expressive tone; and when voice returns, how carefully is the final turn to the major placed. It is but a short hop and a skip to John Dowland, but what an

expression of night this is: *In darkness let me dwell*. A song celebrated by singers from Alfred Deller to Sting, ZEFORO TORNA adds its own spin, Binon's voice so perfectly clear.

I was not able to find much on the anonymous text song *O stelle homicide!* (O murderous stars!) by Etienne Moulinié, from that composer's *Troisième livre d'airs en cour* (Paris, Pierre Ballard, 1629). The piece is what might be described as "French-style Italianate"; Moulinié was associated with the first generation of Baroque composers of the *ballet de cour* (along with such composers as Antoine Boesset, Claude Le Jeune, Jean de Cambefort, Michel Lambert, and, most famous of all, Lully). How joyful this performance of *O stelle homicide!*, De bruyn's strumming animated, and featuring a delightful violin break from Binon (the stars aren't quite as murderous as the title implies).

Respite is delivered via Francis Pilkington's *Rest, sweet nymphs*, deliciously sung, while starry references in the text to the previous song ("Charm your star-brighter eyes"). But what happens when sleep is granted? *The dark is my delight* is one possible answer, of course, an anonymous song (although this documentation also gives "author unknown," some claim the text is by Jacobean playwright John Marston, *c*. 1575–1634). The slightly risqué language ("My body is but little … I love to sleep against the prickle") is typical of Jacobean character songs; the music was preserved in early 17th-century English lute song and air collections.

How wonderful to have not one, but two offerings by Johannes Heironymous Kapsberger, one vocal, one instrumental. There is no shortage of alternatives to the song *Figlio dormi*, although the one I had to make a beeline for was Versailles regular Gwendoline Blondeel on her Harmonia Mundi disc, *Amor eterno*, a recent recording from Paris wherein she is joined by both harp and theorbo. Binon is just as tender as Blondeel, but goes even deeper (although the very close of Blondeel's recording is more daring, more effective). Here, *Figlio dormi* is twinned with one of Kapsberger's magnetic Toccatas ("Toccata Seconda Arpeggiata" from the 1604 Venice *Libro primo d'intavolatura di chitarone*), a magnificent performance by De bruyn. There is a shedload of recordings of this out there, embedded in a plethora of concepts, but it is the recording by Rolf Lslevand that enchants (in addition to De bruyn) on ECM.

More joy from this reviewer greets the name of Alessandro Scarlatti, here represented by his "O cessate di piagarmi" (O stop wounding me) from *Il Pompeo*. It was fascinating to hear Tito Gobbi's version (with harpsichord, Roy Jesson), while Cecilia Bartoli brings her own irrepressible persona to her Decca performance. ZEFIRO TORNA's account is the most intimate, a vulnerable plea to end cruelty, left unresolved at the end.

The "Canzonetta spirituale sopra la nanna," *Hor ch'è tempo di dormire* (Now it is time to sleep) is one of Tarquinio Merula's more famous compositions. Montserrat Figueras' version on Alia Vox takes some beating (*Fanfare* 32:4, an unmissable all-Merula disc with Hesperion XXI), but Binon is even more impressive, daring to take the music to the most tender places. This is a lullaby ("Sleep, my child …") but one surely born of a mother's pain: De bruyn's dissonances are like stabs to the heart. This is by far the longest track (8:04), unpredictable, sometimes Monteverdian in its mode of declamation (Merula was, as they say, one of the composers "in the shadow of Monteverdi").

Italian lutenist and composer Michelangnolo Galilei (*c*. 1575–1631, younger brother of Galileo) offers a *Toccata*. He mainly wrote for ten-course lute, and this one I believe is indeed just called "Toccata"; against De bruyn's quasi-improvised account, Binon recites T. S. Eliot, part of the *Four Quartets* (the third, centering on solitude).

After the dark, the dawn, an *Aubade* by Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687), known also either by its first line (also titularly quoted here, "J'ai veu le point du jour"; I saw the break of

dawn) and as “Le reveil de Calliste.” Another song of the court, it is the perfect close, a gentle awakening to the light.

I cannot recommend ZEFIRO TORNA enough: the performances are flawless, as is the recording. *Somnia* has a 100 percent guaranteed place in my next Want List. **Colin Clarke**

Five stars: I cannot recommend *Zefiro Torna* enough: the performances are flawless, as is the recording