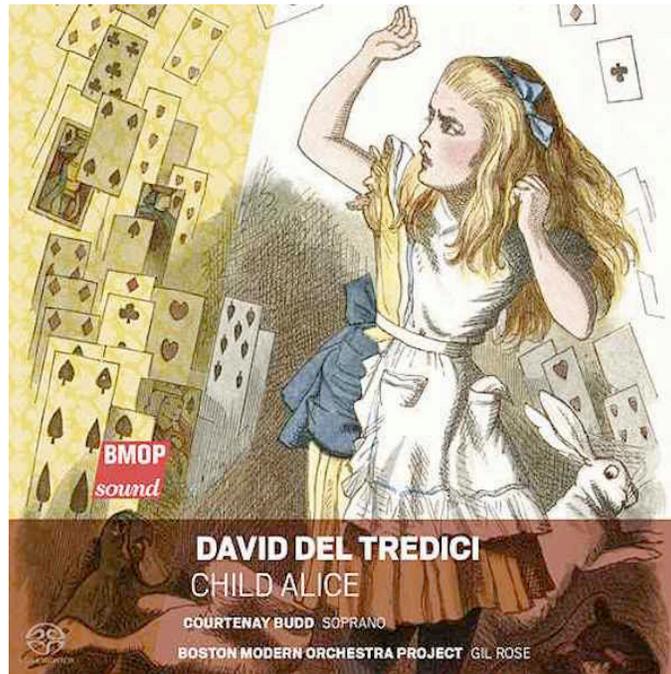




Classical CD Reviews: David Del Tredici's "Child Alice"

Child Alice is an important addition to the recorded catalogue of major American symphonic music

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Few works of literature compare, for sheer invention, spirit, and zaniness, with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. So it's appropriate that David Del Tredici's *Child Alice*, the sixth of his ten (to date) settings of Carroll texts, sounds like pretty much nothing else in the canon. Well, maybe that's not *entirely* true. In *Child Alice*, Del Tredici emulates the styles of Mahler and Elgar pretty strongly, and there's a dash or two of Ives to be found – as well as hints of a good half-dozen or so other canonical voices.

But it speaks to the strength of Del Tredici's musical argument and the conviction of his writing that none of these inferences detract from the music's expressive riches (nor is the score just a collage of old sounds: it's plenty spiky, acerbic, and dissonant, too). Quite the opposite: these gestures infuse *Child Alice* with a certain charm that, thirty years after its first full performance, is rich and nostalgic, yes, but plenty forceful and, above all, staggeringly brilliant. Indeed, at this

point one can focus *Child Alice's* poignant depths, its moments of giddy ecstasy, its reservoirs of sadness and terror, more than its stylistic quirks, which are no where near as controversial or shocking as they were three decades back.

If *Child Alice's* pages are marked by a kind of Lisztian excess (at least in its scoring), they share a directness of spirit and expression that's reminiscent of Beethoven (or, maybe better, Wagner) at his most dramatically daring. Written between 1977 and 1981 and setting poems that preface *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Del Tredici's score is an often-unsung and, before now, unheard late-20th-century masterpiece. The Boston Modern Orchestra Project's (BMOP) new recording of the piece (taped at Jordan Hall last spring) rectifies that last problem, and it does so with abandon.

One of the reasons *Child Alice* has remained obscure owes to its vocal demands. It's a piece that requires a soprano of Wagnerian stamina (she sings for about an hour-and-a-half) as well as voice that can navigate the stratospheric acrobatics of *bel canto*. In Courtenay Budd, BMOP and Del Tredici have an ideal soloist, one whose singing evinces purity and innocence but also strength of character and a certain mischievousness that suits this music well. Her diction is largely excellent, even in the highest-tessitura passages, and, expressively, she brings a winning understanding to Del Tredici's treacherous vocal writing.

If the soprano part is wickedly difficult (and it is), Del Tredici's orchestral writing is just slightly less so. BMOP's performance here, though, makes easy work of the two purely orchestral movements (the march in the middle of "In Memory of a Summer Day" and Part II's "Happy Voices") and provides suitably atmospheric playing when accompanying Budd. There are a couple of tentative transitional spots here and there but the big picture comes across with pristine clarity and Gil Rose's conducting ably captures the music's sense of sweep and space.

In all, this *Child Alice* is an important addition to the recorded catalogue of major American symphonic music. It's another demonstration of BMOP at its musical and missional best and marks a worthy way to celebrate Del Tredici during his 80th-birthday year. More than that, it's a fine recording of a truly great piece of music that needs to be heard. Bravo, all around.