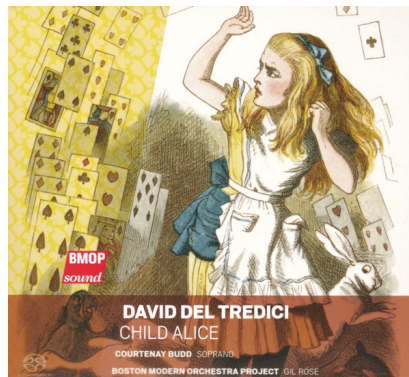


# stereophile

## Del Tredici's Child Alice for the Holidays

Jason Victor Serinus | Dec 24, 2017



If the holidays are a time for fantasy, what better way to celebrate than with the first complete recording of David Del Tredici's (b. 1937) absolutely fantastic fantasy, *Child Alice* for soprano and orchestra? Based on the "Alice" adventures of Lewis Carroll—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and the sequel, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found* (1871)—the first part of *Child Alice*, entitled *In Memory of a Summer Day*, won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize in Music, and helped solidify the then 43 year-old composer's position as the foremost exponent of the Neo-Romantic movement in music. As explained in a wonderful essay by my friend, Frank J. Oteri, Del Tredici's obsession with Alice first found its musical voice in *Pop-Pourri* (1968). Almost three decades later, Del Tredici brought his Alice adventures to a close with *Cabbages and Kings* (1996). Along the way, as Alice piece after Alice piece flowed from his pen, his musical language transformed from 12-tone (atonal) to unabashedly tonal.

No amount of biographical information, however, can adequately prepare you for *Child Alice*. Recorded by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) under Gil Rose, the two-SACD hi-resolution album reveals that Del Tredici's description of the work as "very extravagant" (in his extensive 13-page contribution to the album's 20-pages of liner notes) is a major understatement. For an example of what Del Tredici created, take a listen to this YouTube clip of the first section of Part I, "Simple Alice." Although all the other sections of the work seem to be on YouTube, listening there will only give you a hint of how colorful and overwhelming this music can sound on a good system.

Looking at the personnel Rose assembled for the project—soprano Courtenay Budd was supported / dueted by six percussionists, one flautist, two piccolo players, four clarinetists, three bassoonists, four hornists, four trumpeters, three trombonists (including bass trombone), one tuba player, a pianist and two harpists as well as large string sections, included—gives a sense of the immensity of Del Tredici's fantasy. In measure after measure, Budd and the orchestra whirl through the stratosphere, down the metaphoric rabbit hole, and back out again. That they succeed in meeting the music's demands and emerge intact is awe-inspiring.

Although Budd's aptly little girlish sound is curiously tremulous, she somehow manages to negotiate the music's extremely high tessitura and continuous assaults on the vocal chords with seeming aplomb. Her control is complete, and her extended trill and breath control most impressive.

As I listened to the orchestral scherzo in Part I of *Child Alice*, my thoughts turned to the cacophony of sounds and clash of ideas created by an earlier pioneering American

maverick composer, Charles Ives. Truth be told, some of Del Tredici's orchestral writing sounds like watching Ives' proverbial Fourth of July parade on acid. (That's LSD for the uninitiated.)

"As a boisterous scherzo is to a courtly minuet, so might my . . . well . . . SuperMarch be to more familiar specimens of the genre," Del Tredici writes in the notes. "Instead of the usual military associations, the piece suggests to me the brightness of mid-day—a blazing overhead sun reflecting dazzlingly, blindingly off the water's surface."

That's another way of saying that the musical barrage is relentless. In Part 1, you will hear a succession of climaxes—that's climax after climax—that at one point includes a wind machine. Just as you think the music can't possibly get any bigger as the same theme repeats over and over, a siren goes off. To think that, in Del Tredici's mind, the seeds of this huge piece were visualized as two short lieder (songs) that would have been a perfect fit for any soprano's song recital makes you wonder if he downed an entire gallon of Miracle Grow before setting to work.

Del Tredici's musical transformations continued after *Alice*, as he moved on to unabashedly explore gay life in all its facets. This did the San Francisco Symphony under Michael Tilson Thomas first deliver, in 2000, an astounding performance of two parts of Del Tredici's *Adventures Underground* (1971, rev. 1977) that showcased the incomparable soprano Lauren Flanigan imitating a mouse as she squeaked out 29 high D-flats—I was there, watching huge video screen close-ups of Flanigan going bananas—and then commission Del Tredici's *Gay Life* (2001), for amplified solo baritone and orchestra.

Perhaps the fact that Del Tredici's subsequent foray into gay life has included an immersion in S&M leads to my conviction that *Child Alice* is a novel exercise in aural bondage. Its Pulitzer Prize-winning Part I does nothing if not capture you and refuse to turn you loose. Lord almighty, it even includes an extended section for voice and orchestra that comes across as a late 20th century answer to Richard Wagner's *Liebeströde*.

Excess upon excess, repetition to the point of numbness . . . by the end of Part I, you may feel like a prizefighter needing to be hosed off before moving on to Part II. What you'll experience there, I'm not even going to begin to describe.

Hear *Child Alice* you must. If you're not game to enter Del Tredici's amazing sound world and allow him to play with you as he will, you're certainly not ready for what lies ahead in 2018.