



Southwestern Oklahoma State University
SWOSU Digital Commons

Mythprint Book Reviews

Mythopoeic Society

Winter 12-15-2021

The Fall of Gondolin: Complete Demo Recording, by Paul Corfield Godfrey. Reviewed by David Bratman.

David Bratman

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mpr_rev



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bratman, David, "The Fall of Gondolin: Complete Demo Recording, by Paul Corfield Godfrey. Reviewed by David Bratman." (2021). *Mythprint Book Reviews*. 5.
https://dc.swosu.edu/mpr_rev/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythprint Book Reviews by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

REVIEWS

Godfrey, Paul Corfield. *The Fall of Gondolin: Complete Demo Recording*. Prima Facie CD, 2018. Reviewed by David Bratman.

Paul Corfield Godfrey is a British composer in the classical tradition who has undertaken the massive project of composing and recording an epic four-opera cycle telling the story of Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. Not since Richard Wagner's *Ring* – a comparison easy to make – has there been a project of this kind on this scale, so far as I know. And it's Tolkien, so it's of special interest to us.

What I have here is a “demo recording” of the fourth opera in the sequence, *The Fall of Gondolin*. It's two CDs playing for nearly two hours. The ten solo roles and a small chorus are sung by professional singers from the Welsh National Opera, and they're mostly pretty good, with only occasional wobbliness when their parts threaten to get outside of their range. Some of them, particularly Simon Crosby Buttle as Tuor, are excellent in enunciation; others could be clearer. Pronunciation of the Elvish names is, so far as I can tell, reasonably accurate.

While the singers are live, the orchestra is entirely synthesized by software, with the tinny sound characteristic of most such computer programs. This, and the lack of an orchestral conductor, are unfortunate, as Godfrey relies heavily on his orchestra to convey the emotion of his story – his strongest resemblance to Wagner. But as this recording claims to be no more than a demo, it will have to do.

There is no libretto in the CD case, though there is a link to an online source on the opera company's website. Godfrey compiled the text from a wide selection of Tolkien's posthumous publications (the book of *The Fall of Gondolin* had

not yet been published). This compilation was a particular challenge in the case of Gondolin, for which usable primary sources are rare. This opera is more a series of set pieces than a continuous story, though that's not uncommon for formal, non-verismo opera. The only thing Godfrey could find, for instance, to serve as a love duet between Tuor and Idril was to split between them the lyric poem “The Song of Ælfwine” from *The Lost Road*, which because of its yearning for Valinor must be set after their marriage and the birth of Eärendil (much referred to but not a character in the opera).

But though the second half of the story is the more fragmentary, it's the first half that gives Godfrey more trouble. After a prologue in which Ulmo instructs Turgon to build his city, the tale proper begins with Aredhel requesting to leave, and the plot proceeds on at a glacial pace from there. Halfway through, where you switch discs, Tuor still hasn't arrived at the city. Part of the problem with the first half is that much of the plot is narrated by the chorus, an inelegant procedure. Yet even all this background wouldn't be enough to explain the story to someone who doesn't already know it: what Eöl has against Turgon, for instance, remains a mystery in this text. The other problem is that the composition is as glacial as the story. The sung text is slow recitative, sometimes literally monotonic. The orchestra tends to flood in at key moments, which together with the tinny sound of the synthesizer makes it resemble an organ more than an orchestra.

I would accordingly recommend that the curious listener to this saga start with disc two, which is much better. This begins with strong-voiced Tuor in the wilderness singing a genuine through-composed aria, with melodic grace and presence, the text excerpted from the poem “The Horns of Ylmir” from *The Shaping of Middle-earth*. Tuor is then taken to Gondolin; his meeting with Idril is succeeded by a percussion-laden wedding march, an effective use of the synthesized music; then Idril and Tuor's duet; Maeglin betrays the city (Morgoth has one line, in a deep echoing voice like a Peter Jackson villain); an unaccompanied hymn to Ilúvatar; and the actual fall of Gondolin is the last full scene, a highly formalized procedure in which the weight of the action is carried by the orchestra without the inconstant flooding of the earlier scenes and without any intrusive narration. (There are some faint background sound effects of

battle and flame, and one loud noise: Maeglin screaming as he falls from the precipice.) An epilogue, based on the poem “The Happy Mariners” and set on the shore of the Sea, for soloists and chorus with light orchestration, is musically the most effective thing in the opera.

Godfrey is a tonal composer in a neo-romantic idiom, prone to the employment of key motifs in his accompaniment, though not in the heavy-handed manner of Wagner. His vocal lines are less motivically structured and more chromatic as well as more meandering. The music’s function is to carry the story and not to convey pretty tunes; Godfrey avoids strophism even when the verse might suggest it, and the beauty of his work is of a more distant and ethereal kind.

In general, based on this excerpt it looks like an impressive project, possibly at a larger scale than it can digest artistically but containing attractive and effective things, a respectful and intelligent tribute to Tolkien.

