

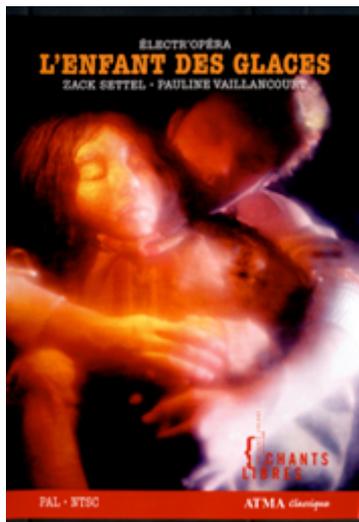
## RECORDINGS

### Video

---

#### SETTEL/VAILLANCOURT: *L'ENFANT DES GLACES*

□ Vaillancourt; Maheux. Production: Vaillancourt. PAL-NTSC ATMA Classique, 56 mins., no subtitles



For those of us whose preference in music and opera leans toward the new, the experimental and the unusual, the electronic opera *L'Enfant des Glaces* is a welcome draft of fresh air. Singer, performance artist, stage director and creative inspiration to numerous others in the most advanced artistic circles in Europe and Canada, Pauline Vaillancourt conceived *L'Enfant des Glaces*, and here performs it with Jean Maheux. *L'Enfant des Glaces* was created in 2000 for Vaillancourt's Quebec-based Chants Libres, an organization that produces and presents rarely performed pieces of particular artistic merit and new works. This DVD is of a performance dating from 2003.

Rather than following the more traditional, almost cinematic narrative of the opera mainstream, *L'Enfant des Glaces* is much more akin in structure to a fable. As C. M. Woodhouse has described it, a fable is not a work of fiction but "a transcription of a view of life into terms of highly simplified symbols." This description applies well to *L'Enfant des Glaces*. In it, the voice of a child frozen for centuries in the ice emits a spirit message to a Man (Maheux) and a Woman (Vaillancourt). This message prompts the Man and Woman to find each other and to work together to try to survive in what seems to be a turbulent, even post-apocalyptic world. The exact time and place are not specified. The Man

and the Woman also lack specific identities and, in fact, are really archetypes rather than specific characters. The entirety of the libretto consists of two short, melancholic quotations, one from nineteenth-century French poet Gerard de Nerval, one from seventeenth-century Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo. These texts, intentionally subliminal to the electronics, are spoken and sung in a fragmented conglomeration of Armenian, Finnish, Japanese, Persian, Pular and Russian, adding to the opera's many layers of ambiguity. At first blush, this description may horrify the more hidebound of traditional opera-lovers. However, *L'Enfant des Glaces* is an extremely thought-provoking theatrical work. Its essentially plotless and wordless nature actually facilitates the listener's ability to find in it much that is meaningful. Its music, characters and setting linger in the mind.

Zack Settel's music demonstrates the capability of computers and live sound-processing to create a versatile, satisfying dramatic effect. His writing for the Woman is warmly resonant, melodically searching. The Man's music tends much more toward the rhythmic, motoric, violent end of the spectrum, except during his tender embrace of the Woman. The electronic keening that accompanies the Woman's lament in the final phase of the action is particularly powerful.

Vaillancourt and Maheux are in complete command of their strenuous, difficult roles. Much more an actor than a singer, Maheux is usually called upon to speak, shout or growl his lines. Yet he manages quite well in his sung passages. Vaillancourt demonstrates what a versatile singer she is, particularly in the lament and in her initial, lyric passages.

The contemporary music/theatrical community in our country, with its desperate, timid, bottom line-oriented mindset, rarely manages to produce or present works of such provocative originality. *L'Enfant des Glaces* gives us a glimpse into a bolder, less compromised artistic milieu. □