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***Silas Marner*. Read by Anna Bentinck. Naxos Complete Classics**

Audiofile praises the ‘pleasant cadence’ of Anna Bentinck’s voice in this recording of George Eliot’s Wordsworthian masterpiece but, initially at least, I found her reading with its beautiful elocution sounded a bit too like Mrs Miniver (contrast Eileen Atkins’s sensitive reading of *The Mill on The Floss* for Cover to Cover). The pace, moreover, is generally rather slow and becomes slower still when Bentinck comes to voice rural speakers like Jem Bryce or the company at the Rainbow Inn, and almost unbearably slow in the case of Snell the landlord (the exception is Dowlas, the quarrelsome farrier, for whom she finds a rather yappy staccato voice). This slowness of pace and the rather all-purpose rural accent have the unfortunate effect of making some characters, especially Dolly Winthrop, sound somewhat like Pam Ayres. Bentinck’s light voice works well enough for Silas Marner himself, however (though I think she hardly makes him sound frantic enough at the beginning of chapter 7) but, unlike, say, Prunella Scales reading *Wives and Daughters* or Miriam Margolyes reading *Oliver Twist* (both available from Audible Audio), she cannot deepen her voice enough for male characters generally. The half-drunk Dunstan Cass in chapter 3 sounds very peculiar and Bentinck has real problems in trying to follow Eliot’s detailed description of Squire Cass’s ‘coughing and interrupted manner of speaking’ (also, Godfrey hardly sounds agitated enough in his painful conversation with the Squire in chapter 9).

She is very much better when voicing the Lammeter sisters. Her characterization of the delightful Priscilla, surely one of the most attractive characters in the book, is excellent and well distinguished from that of the less ebullient Nancy. My feeling was, after listening twice to this reading, that it improved as it went on and as my ear gradually became more attuned to Bentinck’s voice. She certainly chooses an odd voice for ‘Anxiety’ at the end of chapter 9 and is not very successful with the male members of the company at the Red House like Dr Kimble, but her grown-up Eppie is very convincing and the climactic scene in chapter 19 when Godfrey, together with his wife, goes to Marner’s cottage to claim Eppie as his child is movingly read and beautifully paced. Overall, then, I would rate this as a good recording but not one that does much to enrich our experience of Eliot’s narration, as Timothy West’s wonderfully versatile readings for Cover to Cover enhance our enjoyment of Trollope’s works. It is nevertheless a pleasurable way of renewing our acquaintance with this minor masterpiece.

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