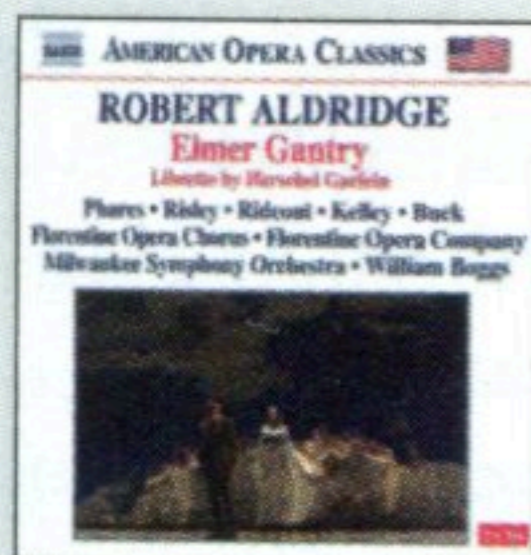


Evangelical opera

Michael Scott Rohan is converted by Aldridge's spirited *Elmer Gantry*



COMPELLING:
Patricia Risley stars
as Sister Jean



ALDRIDGE

Elmer Gantry

Keith Phares, Patricia Risley, Vale Rideout, Frank Kelley, Heather Buck; Florentine Opera Company & Chorus; Milwaukee Symphony/William Boggs
Naxos 8.669032-33 141:38 mins (2 discs)

Available Arkivmusic.com/bbcmusic

Elmer Gantry is becoming increasingly popular with college opera companies, and no wonder. Sinclair Lewis's satire of Bible Belt evangelists is perfect for worldly-wise students, and Robert Aldridge's accessible, wide-screen score with Herschel Garfein's wildly operatic libretto (complete with Immolation scene) bring it

vividly to life. They exploit the very tub-thumping ambience they satirise, offsetting rollicking revival choruses and electric crosses against cynical backstage dealings and sultry sex scenes. Episodes like Elmer's instant conversion and the capitalist-worshipping Elks aren't greatly subtler than *South Park*—but given how real televangelists behave, is it possible to exaggerate?

Rising baritone Keith Phares, curiously innocent in his narcissistic hypocrisy, heads a high-quality cast, with Patricia Risley compelling as the ambiguous Sister Jean. Heather Buck's unambiguous Lulu Baines and Jamie Offenbach's resonant TJ Riggs are typical of the excellent lesser roles, and William Boggs conducts with down-home fervour. Well worth hearing.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

RECORDING ★★★★★