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Grand Larsen-y: Vocal Music of Libby Larsen (review)

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succeed in conveying an image of endless discovery, just as when walking with a companion in a new environment one person will point out one thing, and the other something else. Whatever the individual preferences, the constantly shifting harmony is a joy to experience, both with careful listening and also as sounds quietly articulating a background ambience.

In another observation that is similarly personal, I note that Cage does not provide any advice concerning tempo or duration. While a recorded performance of this work could scarcely be any longer than this one and still fit on a single CD, it would be possible to perform with more variety in the pacing. I found myself occasionally wishing a particular passage was lingered over to a greater extent. In order to keep the total time in check, other moments could push forward with a bit more urgency. In other words, the quirks of my own sensibilities would modify the occasional forceful chord and substitute that impulse with greater flexibility in pacing.

Haskins combines his intellectual prowess with his considerable skill as a pianist, and together with Laurel Karlik Sheehan, who gave the Canadian premiere of *Two*² with Jack Behrens in 1990, they bring an undeniable authority to the performance. Recorded in one complete take with no editing, their performance is strong and secure while at the same time providing graceful shapings along the way. As I continued to listen I thought more in terms such as “magical” and “miraculous.” I kept finding more to like. There is a richness to the performance that gradually reveals itself and the music to be unfathomable. By the time I finished this review, I was reluctant to remove the disc from my CD player.

Complementing the beautiful performance, the recorded sound is excellent, capturing the perfectly matched pianos resonating wonderfully in Kilbourn Recital Hall of the Eastman School of Music. In another wise choice, even though *Two*² is one, through-composed work without movements, track numbers are provided for each renga, and they are identified by the accumulating timing of the whole. Altogether an admirable product.

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Grand Larsen-y: Vocal Music of Libby Larsen. Terry Rhodes, soprano; Ellen Williams, mezzo-soprano; Benton Hess, piano; Steven Reis, cello. Liner notes by Terry Rhodes, Ellen Williams, and Libby Larsen. Song texts and biographies of all artists included. 2004. Albany Records: TROY 634.

Recordings of Libby Larsen’s songs have heretofore been few and far between. This is the first to be devoted in its entirety to her vocal compositions. Two of Larsen’s more familiar and more frequently performed song cycles, *Songs from Letters: Calamity Jane to Her Daughter Janey, 1880–1902* and *Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers*, are included in the program, as well as the newer and lesser-known cycle, *Chanting to Paradise*, which in time might well prove to be an audience favorite. Delightful excerpts from her operas *Eric Hermannson’s Soul*, *Dreaming Blue*, and *Mrs. Dalloway* whet the listener’s aural appetite. Certainly the most unusual piece included on this recording is *Hell’s Belles*, for mezzo-soprano and five-octave bell choir, which is rarely performed due to the difficulty of the piece and the forces required to present it.

Believing that a culture's music emerges from the spoken language of its people, Larsen begins her vocal compositions by allowing the natural inflection and rhythms of spoken American English to emerge in the melodies and rhythms of the songs. She describes American English as "more rhythmic than melodic. It's truncated and full of body language punctuation" (www.newmusicbox.org/archive/firstperson/larsen/interview7.html). One can perceive from listening to her music that she enjoys the creative challenge of rendering physical punctuation in an aural medium. Syllabic text setting predominates her song settings.

Larsen's signature characteristic in solo vocal music—a great proportion of which sets writings by American women authors—is a continuous, repetitive, perpetual motion figure in the accompaniment. This ostinato is comprised of a melodic figure, a harmonic sequence, a rhythmic pattern, or combinations of these elements. This is a useful device, especially when setting poetry that speaks of events that are in continuous motion, such as the wind waving grain or grass, river water flowing slowly, and moving railroad cars. She describes her compositional style as "built around tonal areas that are vaguely modal and reinforced through pedal tones in the bass. The key to my music is to hear tones that aren't articulated and to be able to listen to low tones" (www.answers.com/topic/libby-larsen-classical-musician?cat=entertainment).

Margaret Songs—Three Songs from Willa Cather (1998) is a group of three songs for soprano, taken from Larsen's eighth opera, the chamber work *Eric Hermannson's Soul*, based on a short story by Cather, libretto by Charles Rader-Shieber. These excerpts make a lovely grouping for a recital. Rhodes's excellent diction, especially on tones above the staff, is remarkable. From a pedagogical standpoint, her singing gives an excellent example of effective vowel modification. The accompanimental figures in the song of the group, "Bright Rails," call to mind the steady motions and sounds of the muddy, flowing Missouri River and the steady movement of a chugging locomotive. In "So little there," Larsen has fashioned an effective musical description of the contrast between the hustle-bustle life in New York City and that of living in a country of wide expanses. New York is represented with a recitative-style delivery with short, quick phrases; slower, legato sections represent Nebraska. (This piece is reminiscent of "Laurie's Song" from Copland's *The Tender Land*.) The duet that follows begins with a recitative, followed by an arioso for mezzo-soprano and a conversation between the two voices. It ends with another quasi-recitative and short, dramatic, impassioned duet. The piano's flowing motive with punctuations of short high notes evokes an atmosphere of stars in the sky and fields shimmering in the moonlight.

Although the majority of Larsen's songs have been written for high voice, one of a handful of her works for lower voices is the cycle *Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers (A Collection of Love Songs)*, for mezzo-soprano, cello, and piano. This work presents a musical challenge for all musicians involved and takes a sophisticated listener to appreciate fully. The poems, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Rainer Maria Rilke (in English translations by M. D. Herder Norton), Hilda Doolittle, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, address the topics of love, music, nature, and flowers. The songs sound tonal in the instrumental interludes, less so when the voice enters. In addition to allowing the instruments to make commentary on the texts, Larsen uses them to bring out the mood and subject matter of each piece. Williams' zingy mezzo voice has bright, almost metallic-

sounding, soprano-like overtones. She has, however, slight intonation problems throughout the cycle. Williams has also chosen to sing the set with very little dynamic contrast, although there is a great deal of dynamic variety written in the score.

Chanting to Paradise (1997; premiered by Harriet McCleary, soprano) contains four settings of poems by Emily Dickinson. The minimal textures in the accompaniments create an effect of musical pointillism, which effectively mimics Dickinson's sparse verbal textures and efficient use of words. The repetitive perpetual motion figures in the accompaniment, though, become somewhat wearing on the listener. Some slight intonation problems are readily forgiven as Rhodes closely attends to dynamic contrasts and varied timbres to bring out the meaning of the text.

The aforementioned *Hell's Belles* (2001)—easily the most impressive work on the CD—requires an accomplished handbell choir with a five-octave set of bells. (The work was commissioned and premiered by the Sonos Handbell Ensemble and Frederica Von Stade in San Francisco, June 29, 2001.) In addition to quoting a nursery rhyme, the texts are by Tallulah Bankhead, Billie Jean King, Gertrude Stein, Olive Logan, Jenny Joseph, and Armor Keller (the latter adapted by Larsen). This most unusual work plays on the plethora of effects of which a bell choir is capable. The bells mimic the sound of plucked strings, echo the melody, punctuate the text, as well as create other, both earthly and ethereal effects. Again, Larsen employs *ostinati* in the accompaniments of all the songs. This is a particularly useful tool in composing for bell ringers. When the vocal line contains repetitions of melodic lines that the listener can grasp (and sing along with), they provide a respite from the chromaticism and unexpected melodic movement that otherwise characterizes these songs.

Composed in 1989, the cycle *Songs from Letters: Calamity Jane to Her Daughter Janey, 1880–1902* has already become part of American sopranos' standard repertoire and is the most recorded of Larsen's vocal works. These five musical "snapshots" express what Larsen describes as Calamity Jane's "rough-toughness" and her "struggle to explain herself to her daughter." Rhodes's and Hess's sensitive ensemble brings alive Calamity Jane's adventuresome spirit and emotionally difficult life, making this interpretation of the work a most welcome addition to any song-lover's CD collection.

The order of works on this recording is very effective, alternating between the two singers, with duets interspersed. The riotous humor of *Hell's Belles* balances the serious nature of the other works. With a few exceptions (most noticeably in *Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers*) the audio quality and mixing of the recording is quite good. The extensive liner notes (composed by Larsen with an introduction by Rhodes and Williams) include all texts, provide helpful source of information about Larsen and her process of composing for voice.

This CD lessens the void of good recordings of contemporary and performable American song. By introducing singers, teachers, and listeners to more of Larsen's wide variety of appealing of vocal music, this recording will certainly help lead to the well-deserved and wider performance of her vocal works.

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