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American Virtuoso (review)

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American Virtuoso. World Premiere Recordings. James Giles, piano. Lowell Liebermann. *Sonata No. 3*. Stephen Hough. *Suite R-B*. Augusta Read Thomas. *Four Etudes*. Ned Rorem. *Recalling*. C. Curtis-Smith and William Bolcom. *Collusions*. James Wintle. *Balletto*. Earl Wild. *Jarabe Tapatio "Mexican Hat Dance,"* arrangement. Liner notes. 2006. Albany Records TROY 860.

American Virtuoso is indeed that—a recording of brilliant pieces mostly by American composers and played by the American virtuoso pianist James Giles. He explains in his liner notes (which quote generously from the composers) that all of the works, aside from the first two etudes by Augusta Read Thomas, were written for and premiered by him. This is also the world-premiere recording of all the works except the Wild arrangement. Giles notes: "This compilation represents a cross section of American piano music written around the turn of the new millennium. The title *American Virtuoso* refers as much to the music as to its performer and describes how these composers have so idiomatically responded to the challenge of writing for the piano." And while some might think it immodest to refer to oneself as a virtuoso, James Giles, currently on the faculty at Northwestern University, has earned that right. Recorded over a span of three days in 2004, this recording surely ranks as one of his most impressive achievements to date, presenting a wide array of styles in convincing fashion.

While this recording does represent an eclectic mix of repertoire, Lowell Liebermann's (b. 1961) *Sonata no. 3*, op. 82, is the featured piece. Liebermann has published over one hundred works to date, including many works for solo piano—not surprising, considering that he is himself an accomplished pianist. His most popular work for solo piano, *Gargoyles*, op. 29 from 1989, has already been recorded eleven times. (Among the best is that by Stephen Hough, to whom Lieberman dedicated that work, his first two piano sonatas and several others.) Lieberman's *Piano Sonata no. 3* was written in 2002 for Giles and remains, to date, his most extended work for solo piano, lasting approximately sixteen minutes.

Liebermann remarks, "The Third Sonata is in one movement that has several interconnected sections." Taken as a whole, the work has a fast-slow-fast structure with many of the qualities found in his *Gargoyles*, *Four Apparitions*, and some of the *Nocturnes*. While Liebermann's harmonic language mixes tonal and atonal elements, his formal structure follows traditional forms. While this work is technically in a single movement, one obviously hears it as a multimovement work in terms of moods. The first "movement" displays an ingenious economy of material while the next is, by turns, both languid and frenetic. The perpetual motion of the third "movement" is broken by two quotations from the slow "movement" before the coda brings the work to a violent conclusion. With its driving, motivic nature and percussive chords, one is sometimes reminded of Prokofiev's Sixth Piano Sonata. All told, this is a brilliant piece, clearly a valuable addition to the repertoire. And it is hard not to marvel at Giles's playing: his ability to enact character shifts, achieve power and fluency, and play with the utmost accuracy combine to make this an impressive performance.

While the *Sonata no. 3* headlines this recording, Giles also includes Stephen Hough's (b. 1961) *Suite R-B*—a welcome respite from the seriousness of Liebermann's piece. Hough's *Suite R-B* comprises six delightful character pieces.

Bathed in color and sharply defined, all six are based upon two motives. As Hough explains, one of the motives comes from his friend, Richard Goula, for whom the suite is obliquely named. (Rather than being called, "Suite R-G" as one might expect, it is entitled *Suite R-B* since Hough said that Goula "found himself inappropriately but affectionately nicknamed Ritchie-Bitchie.") As with the Lieberman, Giles's playing here demonstrates a wide palette of color.

The Four Etudes by Augusta Read Thomas (b. 1964) represent a composer who has taken up writing etudes prior to composing a substantive body of piano works: her only other solo piano pieces to date are *Love Twitters*, *Lullaby: Bells and Prayers for Elliot*, and Piano Etudes 5 and 6, all of which follow her Four Etudes. This is not a criticism, but merely underscores how far the etude genre has evolved since Debussy. In the modern context the etude is less a technical exercise than a vehicle for wonderfully explorative ideas. Such is the case with Thomas's works as each etude is conceptually challenging and differs from the rest. Thomas says, "[T]he aim of my piano etudes, which are composed in pairs, is to create drastically different sonic effects for each using musical material identical to both." The first Etude, *Orbital Beacons—homage to Berio* (1996), is particularly notable for its complex juxtaposed layers of sound. One could, I believe, draw comparisons to Debussy's *pour les Sonorités opposées*, from his set of Etudes. This facet is not accidental either: Thomas acknowledges that "we can sense Debussy, Ravel, Webern, and Berio, in addition to jazz" in these works. Unquestionably, though, these Four Etudes make fresh additions to the piano repertoire.

While Ned Rorem (b. 1924) has written four piano concertos, three sonatas, a set of etudes, and several other character pieces for the instrument, it remains difficult to think of him as a composer for the piano, given his remarkable body of art songs. *Recalling*, a set of three pieces, was written in 2003 expressly for Giles. On the basis of their individual titles *Remembering Lake Michigan*, *The Wind Remains* (*Remembering Paul Bowles*), and *Remembering Tomorrow*, it seems likely that this set would follow the impressionistic vein of his *Eight Etudes* (1975). Rorem tries, however, to debunk that idea by stating that *Remembering Lake Michigan* "is not meant to evoke so much as to honor my native Chicago." Nevertheless, this piece's association with impressionism lingers. With its slow, ominous opening phrases punctuated with dissonance, one could envision Lake Michigan on a cold, winter day. Rorem goes on to say that "*The Wind Remains* quotes the descending minor third—the 'dying fall' as utilized by Paul Bowles in his little opera (1942) based on a Lorca play." Finally, Rorem adds, "*Remembering Tomorrow* defies explanation, as indeed does any music"—and indeed the piece does seem enigmatic. *Recalling* is an impressive set that will challenge pianist and audiences alike.

Collusions, a set of five short pieces dating from 1998, is a unique collaboration by Curtis Curtis-Smith (b. 1941) and William Bolcom (b. 1938). As far as their piano works are concerned, Curtis-Smith is perhaps best known for his extended piano techniques (especially *bowed* piano) while Bolcom's name is synonymous with rags (though both composers have also written sets of piano etudes). Curtis-Smith tells us that the history behind *Collusions* really began when the two of them taught at the University of Michigan. Among other things, he and Bolcom shared various ideas and also devised musical motives for their wives. He explains further that "over the years, these little motifs have had a way of turning up in unexpected places. . . . And finally, in *Collusions*." He began

these pieces as an extension of their exchanges. "One day, I left some five-odd measures of music on the studio desk, writing at the top of the manuscript: 'Bill! Add a few measures, then I'll do some more.'" While these origins are certainly interesting, it is also hard to tell which composer is chiefly responsible for each piece or segment. For instance, in *Snippets*, there is a section that clearly sounds like Bolcom, reminiscent of a slow rag. But Curtis-Smith refutes that idea telling us he wrote this passage to mimic Bolcom. So, it seems that *Collusions* is a truly collaborative and clever creation.

Rounding out the recording are James Wintle's (b. 1943) *Balletto* and Earl Wild's (b. 1915) arrangement of the *Mexican Hat Dance*. *Balletto*, from 2002, is a one-movement work about which Wintle explains that "the emphasis is on motions associated with dancers interpreting the movement of birds: in flight, at play, in danger, and finally at rest." He clearly succeeds: one easily imagines his piece choreographed. Finally, Wild offers a fitting coda to *American Virtuoso* with his pyrotechnical and humorous paraphrase of the well-known hat dance, written by him as an encore piece in 2002. As with the other pieces on this Albany recording, Giles plays it brilliantly, with technical dash and clarity.

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