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FEATURE REVIEW by Peter J. Rabinowitz

TO KEEP THE DARK AWAY • Gayle Martin (pn) •
RAVELLO 7927 (64:38)

SCHUMANN/LISZT Widmung. SHATIN To Keep the Dark Away. Fantasy on St. Cecilia. PROKOFIEV; Romeo and Juliet: The Street Awakens; Arrival of the Guests; The Young Juliet; The Montagues and the Capulets; Mercutio. WAGNER/LISZT Ballade of the Flying Dutchman. Isoldes Liebestod

You may never have heard of Gayle Martin (formerly Gayle Martin Henry) before; although she's far from a newcomer, this is, I believe, only the second time she's shown up in Fanfare. But from the first measures of the Schumann-Liszt Widmung, which opens this disc, you know you're in the presence of a first-rate Romantic pianist, one who coaxes out the music with a succulent and richly varied tone, a willingness to heighten dynamic contrasts, and a rubato that massages your emotions without ever letting the music turn slack or self-indulgent. Then again, from the first measures of the Prokofiev, you know that you're in the presence of a first-rate Modernist pianist, one who snaps out the music with bold colors, tightly sprung rhythms, and crunchy dissonances intensified by spiky articulation. And yet despite their surface differences, the performances, deeper down, have a lot in common, for the Prokofiev, too, manifests an unerring sympathy for the music's shifting colors and emotional currents. Note, for instance, how well Martin brings out the menacing shadows in the middle of "Montagues and Capulets" or the skill with which she captures the mercurial mood swings of "The Young Juliet."

This adaptability and sensitivity make Martin an ideal interpreter for what appears to be the *raison d'être* of the disc, the pair of works by Judith Shatin. To Keep the Dark Away (2011) is a series of five aphoristic and subtle miniatures, inspired by poems of Emily Dickinson, written "during a dark period" when Shatin was "struggling with health issues"—and, the composer points out, "the process of composing indeed helped 'to keep the dark away.'" The Fantasy on St. Cecilia is a far more monumental work. A 1996 transcription of an earlier piano concerto, The Passion of St. Cecilia (composed in 1985 and reviewed by Peter Burwasser in Fanfare 28:2), it's larger in scale, more imposing in gesture, more ostentatious in its virtuosity. In her notes, Katherine Soroka calls it a "pianistic tour de force of Lisztian proportions"—and the claim is doubly appropriate, since the Fantasy not only demands a staggering technique but also reflects, in its allusions, the reverence for Bach that marks so many of Liszt's compositions. (Significantly,

Bach's setting of O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden, to which Shatin alludes in the Fantasy, was also taken up by Liszt in (Via Crucis). And it, too, requires a keen attention to the music's changing landscapes.

Neither of these pieces is easy on the listener. Shatin was trained at Juilliard and at Princeton, studying under Milton Babbitt, among others, when high Modernism still held sway; and you can still hear traces of the post-tonal jaggedness that was popular in those days, especially in *To Keep the Dark Away*. But whatever else you can say about Shatin, she's far from dogmatic: A wide-ranging composer, she's ready to dip into Appalachian or traditional Jewish musical practices (or even Johann Strauss), ready to work with electronics as well as acoustic instruments. And even within these two pieces, her style ranges widely. As I've said, Liszt is called up by the Fantasy; but it's not hard, for instance, to hear smatterings of Scriabin or early Berg in the second piece of *To Keep the Dark Away*; and the Prokofiev Toccata surely stands behind the third. More important, whatever else you can say about Shatin, she's far from cerebral: These pieces may be thorny, but they hit hard, especially in Martin's staggering interpretations. The two Wagner-Liszt selections are impressive, too, especially the Tristan, with its sensuous voicing and its seductive tempo play. Excellent sound, too. Strongly recommended, both for the music and for the performances.