

rafaelmusicnotesdotcom

JUNE 14, 2016

TO KEEP THE DARK AWAY



Ravello Records latest release (July 8, 2016), TO KEEP THE DARK AWAY (RR7937)

(<http://ravellorecords.com/epk/tokeepthedarkaway/>) features an exciting mix of the contemporary and the Romantic piano literature.

Gayle Martin's playing is impressive, her technique beyond reproach, her interpretive approach to Liszt's takes on Schumann's *Widmung* and a couple of Wagner operatic moments broadly Romantic and impassioned, her treatment of Prokofiev's Op. 75 (*Ten Pieces for Piano*) classically elegant and sensitive to the dance-like quality of the music.

But it is the intricately beautiful new music of Judith Shatin and Gayle Martin's playing of it that which makes this album so very special. The composer finds her inspiration for the intriguing opus that gives this CD its title in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Structured as five brief pieces whose titles yield clues to the tone of each one, *To Keep the Dark Away* is effortlessly original and most intriguing.

The first segment of *To Keep the Dark Away* is built over an *ostinato* figure in the bass juxtaposed to another musical gesture in the upper register, neither slavishly adhering to but fancifully hinting at Serialism.

As if searching for a tonal center, the second piece – a scherzo of sorts titled *A Glee Possesseth Me*, echoes Dickinson's poem with its textual ambiguity – "I cannot dance upon my Toes — No Man instructed me — But oftentimes, among my mind, A Glee possesseth me..." Seemingly at random, appearing and disappearing, playfully dancing up and down the keyboard, arpeggios that seem to act as invitations to get up and dance pervade this section.

An Actual Suffering Strengthens is a restless and relentless two and a half minutes of pianistic hurdles, impressively handled by Ms. Martin at warp speed.

The Auroral Light provides a momentary resting point, with an extended syncopated sequence that again searches for tonality in the pointilistic way in which Ms. Shatin responds to the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

The cycle ends with *Whose Spokes a Dizzy Music Makes* – Dickinson's awestruck response to the *perpetuum mobile* of a hummingbird – starting with a simple chordal introduction that is followed by sudden outbursts of flight in the upper register of the piano.

Insistent cluster chords ominously announce the start of *Fantasy on St. Cecilia*, a meditation on the life and death of the second century Roman Christian martyr who became the Catholic patroness of musicians. Here we find the composer writing in a different vein, more severe, more inclined to use flexible atonality without the strictures of a predetermined series, freely using all the pianistic language at her disposal: arpeggios, sudden changes of register and dynamics, *martellato* attacks followed by delicately wrought pianissimi – all of it flawlessly executed by Ms. Martin.

"Yohohoe! Yohohohoe! Yohohoe! Yohoe! Have you seen the ship upon the ocean with blood-red sails and black masts?" sings Senta, the hapless daughter of Daland, a Dutch seaman. Liszt's *Fantasy on the Ballade of Senta* replicates at the keyboard the sound that the voice of a first-rate Wagnerian soprano would make at the start of the second scene of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*.

What Franz Liszt did to make Wagner's music accessible to the mass public of Mid-century, middle Europe was to take the *Big Moments from Bayreuth* and turn them into tour de force concert pieces for any brave-hearted pianist ready to take them on and live to tell. Gayle Martin does so, diving head-on into the maelstrom of Senta's *Ballade* and into the chromaticism of Isolde's *Liebestod* with pianistic expansiveness, gusto and an exuberant flair for the dramatic.

In this *Ravello Records* album, made in America and lovingly curated and engineered – as all releases of this enterprising company are – two outstanding musicians celebrate the poetry of Emily Dickinson, commemorate St. Cecilia, patroness of musicians, and through Liszt and Wagner portray the potent love in life and beyond of two iconic heroines, Senta and Isolde, in a CD deserving of major recognition.

Rafael de Acha