

## **To Keep the Dark Away: A Joint Interview with pianist Gayle Martin and composer Judith Shatin BY COLIN CLARKE**

Back in *Fanfare* 37:6, I interviewed composer Judith Shatin, concentrating on a disc of her music on the Innova label, *Time to Burn*. This time, the scope of the interview is widened: a joint interview around a multi-composer disc on Ravello Records, *To Keep the Dark Away*, with the pianist Gayle Martin. We expand on some ideas introduced in the earlier interview (narrative in music, for example) while introducing new ones. As the review appended to this interview implies, multi-composer discs, or “recitals” as we sometimes rather carelessly describe them, rarely have the cogency of this one, nor its musical integrity.

*How was the program and running order decided? Why “Widmung” to open? I note Gayle you commented in the disc liner notes on being drawn to experiences that inspire awe and emotion. And there’s no doubting the intensity and integrity of Schumann’s outpouring here...*

GM: I often begin programs with *Widmung*, which means “Dedication.” Emotionally, it is close to my heart and feels like an invitation to listen in an involved way. I find that it is very accessible to audiences.

Given that this album is a collection of old and new, it was a natural choice to follow this with *To Keep the Dark Away*, a five-movement piece by Judith Shatin, paired with five movements from Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Both Shatin and Prokofiev allowed their musicality to roam freely through their literary inspirations, and both have created masterpieces.

*Fantasy on St. Cecilia* is a marvelous 20-minute, strong and disturbing composition, and deserves a place of honor. The crescendo to this moment has been prepared by the earlier pieces, though I have also enjoyed beginning a program with those rousing growling chords. (That certainly wakes up an audience and entices all the young virtuosos to want to learn it.) Liszt can hold his own against anyone, even when he is channeling the music of Wagner rather purely. The order of the two Wagner/Liszt pieces was deliberate. After “Isolde Liebestod” from *Tristan und Isolde*, what else is there to say? Some compositions that express transcendence, such as “Isolde Liebestod” and Beethoven’s Sonata op. 111, should be played without an encore.

*What is the professional link between the two of you?*

GM: Judith and I met in Aspen, Colorado at the summer Aspen Music Festival. I had never met a composer before and was intrigued by her imagination and inquisitive nature. On some level, knowing her satisfied a yearning I had to ask composers about their works and “what were they thinking?” The following year we both went to The Juilliard School, where we continued our friendship. Her family lived in New Jersey at the time, and they kindly invited me to escape the city at their gracious home.

JS: I composed my piano concerto, *The Passion of St. Cecilia* for Gayle, with her dynamic pianism, tremendous coloristic range, and deep musical responses in mind. She has performed it with the Charlottesville Symphony in Virginia, the Minnesota Orchestra, the Denver Symphony, and recorded it with the Moravian Philharmonic. That recording is available on *Piping the Earth*, reissued by Ravello. At her request, I also composed *Fantasy on St. Cecilia*, which she premiered at the Phillips Collection in Washington DC. And, *To Keep the Dark Away* was commissioned for Gayle by Ellen Waldo, a fan of Gayle’s and also of Dickinson, and premiered at the Tenri Institute in NYC at a concert sponsored by the Leschetizsky Association.

*Judith, regarding “To Keep the Dark Away,” you’ve not taken the first lines of the Dickinson poems as titles, but lines which I assume hold the emotional key to the poem. Would that be fair?*

JS: Yes, that is fair. Gayle, who always seems to have such a direct connection to the links between literature and music, finds one-word descriptions for each movement: reassurance, exuberance, suffering, transcendence and nature. I could not have encapsulated these better. I would add that, in the case of the third movement, I was drawn to the ambiguity of the line “...an actual suffering strengthens...” as, in the context of the poem, it is clear that it is the suffering that becomes stronger. Yet, people often refer to suffering as a building block of character. Certainly, I believe that it can strengthen empathy.

*Judith, in our previous interview for “Fanfare,” you expounded on the importance of narrative in music. In both pieces heard here by yourself, this is again a vital element...*

JS: To understand our experience, we tell ourselves stories. To make sense of the world around us, we tell ourselves stories. The nature of those stories is hugely varied: it can be narrative in the traditional sense, it can be narrative as perceptual grouping, it can be narrative as scientific understanding. We don’t understand atomized blips, but are wired to try to make something of them. Whether what we make of them refers to a story, or a notion of how a musical design works, or how a biological structure unfolds, it is still a narrative. The field of narratology is a fascinating attempt to understand this predilection.

*Gayle, in a similar vein, the disc states that this album is your “response to literature, sacred writing, ballet and opera.” Please tell us how this came about and how you find these inter-disciplinary interactions a rewarding experience. Also, by including transcriptions of various sorts, you say you “impart the inspiration of timeless tales” (that’s what the supporting documentation to the disc says, at least!). Could you expand on that?*

GM: I make up stories about everything I play. Tolstoy wrote that “music is the language of emotion.” That is true for me, and I find that the story can be a unique one for every person. Music can change emotions within a beat (or communicate several at once), and can reveal the turbulence behind an innocent phrase. It can convey the intensely personal, the rhythmic, something observed at a distance, or transcend beyond words. I have always been a great reader and an eclectic one. As a child, I read that the great composers drew their inspiration from nature, from solitude, from philosophical thought, from the divine. This had a great effect on me, and I tried to imagine what they could have been feeling or seeing. It helped to read their biographies and their letters, to be aware of the world they were living in. In that vein, I have also explored the world of ballet, art, opera, great literature, and of sacred writings from many religions.

Each expresses, or tries to express, something timeless that is ultimately beyond words ... creation, birth, existence, questioning, death, the other-dimensional, nature, betrayal, violence, humor, fear, sadness, love in all its forms ... timeless tales that are retold in many forms in all the arts. I have no expertise in the worlds outside of music, so it is fun for me to explore my narrative thesis on a strictly personal and amateur level in disciplines such as dance and painting. At the very least, all these art forms are a font of inspiration for me to use as an interpreter.

*“To Keep the Dark Away” is also the title of the first movement of five, a disjunct, haunting piece. Judith, can you speak about how Dickinson inspires you, firstly? Then how that inspiration is translated from poem to score?*

JS: It is always difficult to draw a one-to-one mapping from text to inspiration to musical setting. I was having some health issues at the time, and these poems were especially resonant due to that. But I have long been drawn to Dickinson’s poetry—in fact I have a volume of her

complete poetry given to me by a friend on the occasion of my sixteenth birthday! As to the musical transformation—often literary or visual images suggest sonic ones. This is not a literal kind of one-to-one relationship, but a more metaphorical one. Here I think of composers such as Takemitsu, often inspired by such sources.

*Gayle, I wonder if you could talk about the pianistic challenges of this piece (“To Keep the Dark Away”)? Also, I wonder if there are any notational elements to Judith’s writing you’d like to highlight? It all sounds so precise! Also I love the way you find the different layers in the third movement (“An Actual Suffering Strengthens”)...*

GM: Working movement by movement:

a. The first, “To Keep the Dark Away,” is all about solace, peace, keeping fear at bay. It is important not to express anxiety. All that is kept well hidden. It is written in 5/4;

b. “A Glee Possesseth Me” was a challenge at first glance, but as I explored its crazed inventiveness, I fell in love and laughter. There are parts that I play in a twirling, dizzying manner; there are parts that I sing (to myself) “La La La La,” in the manner of a Florence Foster Jenkins. I never get tired of finding the humor.

c. “An Actual Suffering Strengthens” is a poem that spoke to me, especially these last couple of years as my mother was failing and dying. It is very tonal in an almost relentless way, joining the centuries from at least the 1600’s. The music used in *Tous les matins du monde* (Lully) comes to mind; also the *Fandango* attributed to Antonio Soler. The music was relentlessly in one key, often a minor one. That relentlessness continued through the use of *Chaconne* (think Bach) and even Beethoven in his *32 Variations* and “*Eroica*” *Variations*. Also: Mendelssohn’s *Variations Serieuses* and Chopin’s *Fourth Ballade*. To slow down a score to a very slow practice tempo is to reveal its secrets. This is why I, as a musician, like to “put my hands” on scores rather than just listen. You never know what will be revealed. In the case of “An Actual Suffering Strengthens,” I found what I believed to be a snippet of the *Dies Irae* (*Days of Wrath*), which turned out to have been in Judith’s subconscious. Whether true or not, this informed my interpretation.

d. “The Auroral Light” is to me a starlight, a light perhaps of outer space. Otherworldly, not connected to human emotion. A sheerly visceral experience of remote beauty.

e. “Whose Spokes a Dizzy Music Makes” ... Well, here I was really glad to get to speak with the composer. The opening chords presented a dilemma to me: Loud? Soft? What do they mean? Columns of sound? Why? I can drive myself crazy over these details and do not feel competent to play a piece until I discover the meaning for myself. I ultimately chose to think of them as “hovering”, as in the way a hummingbird hovers over a blossom to drink. There is also a “hand pedal” effect (silently holding down certain keys to make a subtle echoing sound). Played over that hand pedal effect: the high flights of fancy in the treble clef that sound like bird calls; the low notes that galumph in mimicry of a dog (“my best logician” in the words of Emily Dickinson). Judith knew of my love of dogs (I keep five in Houston), and it tickled her to include the essence of one. I like to think of the ending that disappears into the highest notes of the piano as a “charm of hummingbirds.”

*Gayle, why Prokofiev?*

GM: To watch Alessandra Ferri dance *Juliet* with the American Ballet Theatre opened a new world to me of physical expressiveness. Her movements exhibited both what was happening and what she was thinking—sometimes at odds with each other, which is my experience with the power of music. I find Prokofiev’s music to be a marvelous transcription of Shakespeare’s play, and pianistically, a superb transcription of his orchestral score. Judith Shatin had also reshaped

her orchestral score (superbly) into a piano transcription—*Fantasy on St. Cecilia*—and I intuited that the two works would complement each other. I find Prokofiev to be a bracing composer, not romantic in the way of Schumann/Liszt or Wagner/Liszt, and not even overtly dramatic in the way of Shatin's *St. Cecilia*. However, the musical reimagining that Prokofiev gives to Shakespeare's play is well matched by the sonic interpretation that Shatin gives to Dickinson's poetry.

*Judith, am I right to hear the influence of late Liszt in "Her Struggle", the first panel of the "Fantasy on St. Cecilia"? And can you expand on the Bach influence (and quote from the "St. Matthew Passion") in the central movement, "Her Passion"?*

JS: While I did not refer directly to Liszt, and in fact there is at least as much influence of Lutosławski, it is true that growing up as a pianist, I listened to, and was inspired by, a great deal of Classical and Romantic-era piano music. The augmented pianism of Liszt, coupled with his marvelous coloristic shadings, are certainly part of my musical world view. As to the Bach influence, I have long been drawn to his magnificent music. While I am Jewish, as a child I often played hymns and found particular beauty in *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* (*O Sacred Head Now Wounded*). This hymn has a rather complex history, originally composed by Hans Leo Hasler and eventually arranged by J. S. Bach in his *St. Matthew Passion*, which is where I first encountered it. I chose to unbind the melody in the opening bars of the second movement of *Fantasy on St. Cecilia* (and my original piano concerto, *The Passion of St. Cecilia*), both because of the martyrdom of St. Cecilia, and to connect it to the idea of the Passion.

And, let me just add that this is a perfect example of why "identity politics" should be kept out of music. There is a tremendous variety of music that many of us are drawn to when we experience it that has nothing to do with our own personal backgrounds. I was tremendously lucky that music was part of my public school curricula and after-school offerings in Albany, NY; and various locations in New Jersey. I had the opportunity to learn to play the flute and to do so in band and orchestra, to sing in choruses and to have music education as a part of the regular curriculum.

*Judith, this piece seems to expand our appreciation of St. Cecilia as more than 'just' the patron saint of music. Can you perhaps expand on her life and attraction to you?*

JS: First, the connection between St. Cecilia and music is apparently apocryphal. However, there is a wonderful body of work: literary, artistic and musical, based on her traditional role as the patron saint of musicians. This is what drew me to her, and to her struggle to maintain her belief in the face of a hostile community. There is of course a feminist element to my choice as well—I wanted to focus on a woman's experience of religious persecution and martyrdom. This struggle is unfortunately an ongoing one for countless people today in a multitude of religions.

*And Gayle, this piece seems to make huge technical demands, particularly the final movement ("Her Martyrdom"). There's an almost Lisztian extravagance to the writing, would you agree?*

GM: *Fantasy on St. Cecilia* by Judith Shatin is a composition I love to play, both as a piano concerto (*The Passion of St. Cecilia*) and as a piano solo. I can throw myself into it, heart and soul, with full "Lisztian" romantic gestures. Octaves abound, sonorities well up from the bowels of the piano, and melodies soar in a plaintive, soul-searching way. These are not words usually associated with contemporary music, but I as a performer feel no separation between Shatin's intention and that of romantic composers such as Liszt. In terms of technical prowess, the octave passages are dizzying, both in *St. Cecilia* and in numerous works by Liszt. Judith is not afraid to address the rapture of St. Cecilia through her prayerful meditation. Neither was

Liszt, who, after having lived a full and unconventional life, took vows to four minor orders of the Church, lived in the Vatican for over a year, and was fondly referred to as “Abbé Liszt.”

*The music seems to strive to find the most profound sounds from the piano, as if it wants the instrument to really bare its soul. Would that be a fair comment?*

JS: As someone who spent many hours playing piano while growing up, I find it offers endlessly expressive possibilities. And, no matter how often I compose for it and play it, I always find more timbral nuances. Rather than thinking of the piano as “baring its soul,” I think of it as an interface for a collaboration between composer and performer who, together, form an expressive bond.

GM: Absolutely. I always think in terms of “aliveness” or “soul-quality,” though these words are not adequate for instruments or the music written for them. When I was learning this piece, I often wondered if I was doing “too much” in terms of dynamic contrast and lamenting phrases. The answer from Judith was usually “do more!”

*The “Flying Dutchman” Ballade seems to have links to the final movement of the “Fantasy on St. Cecilia.” Is that correct and if so, would either of you (or both!) care to expand on that?*

GM: *The Ballade of the Flying Dutchman* contrasts stormy struggle with a fervent prayer by Senta to save the Dutchman from his fate. The last movement of Shatin’s *Fantasy on St. Cecilia* contrasts violence with prayerful resignation to one’s fate. According to his student Amy Fay, Liszt turned to his class in Weimar after playing *The Ballade of the Flying Dutchman*, proclaiming that storms were his *forte*, and said, “Da KRACHEN die Bäume (Then *crash* the trees!)” Both Liszt and Shatin have employed unusual coloristic effects, with an ample use of pedal. Shatin uses hand glissandos in which she gives a time directive rather than precise notation. Essentially this creates a louder sound than can be achieved by a traditional *glissando* of fingers, and it is executed with both hands in parallel and contrary motion. The movement ends with forearm clusters and a double-handed meaty fist-chop, signifying the three strokes of the axe that finally martyred St. Cecilia.

It can be argued that this disc reveals love in its infinity: the union of love sanctioned by God, as declared in *Widmung*, written by Robert Schumann for his wife Clara on the occasion of their wedding. Love of nature and earthly joys and struggles, expressed by Judith Shatin, reflecting the poetry of Emily Dickinson. First romantic love and betrayal, re-imagined by Prokofiev, inspired by Shakespeare’s tale of woe. *Fantasy on St. Cecilia*, a meditation on the violent times she lived in and her steadfast spiritual commitment to God. Next, *Ballade of the Flying Dutchman*, the triumph of pure love over a cursed fate; and finally, *Liebestod*, the Love-Death that comes at the end of the Wagner’s 5-hour opera *Tristan und Isolde*. The love here is ecstatic, a consummation of eternal love, embracing the realm beyond death, outside of time.

**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** *Pieces from “Romeo and Juliet,”* op. 75: 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*

The above interview expresses so much about the works on this disc and how they interact: of the vital importance of love, in its many guises, from interpersonal (the Schumanns), to a love of God, to

Love-Death in Wagner. To bring Saint Cecilia and Emily Dickinson together speaks volumes about the sweep of this album. Thought-provoking and deep, this is surely how all multi-composer discs should be, with the chosen composers illuminating each other within the confines of an overarching concept. From that aspect alone, this disc is special.

That is before, of course, taking into consideration the superb performances by Gayle Martin; her intimate way with *Widmung* is the springboard from which it all begins. One of the greatest of all song transcriptions (in the present writer's humble estimation, anyway), Martin gives a performance of great *Schwung*.

The slowly oscillating, hypnotic left-hand of the first of Shatin's *To Keep the Dark Away* (2011) against a highly disjunct right-hand melody could hardly be more contrastive. The five movements, all inspired by Emily Dickinson, are like different elements of a multifaceted jewel. The second, "A glee possesseth me," speaks of the movements of a silly show-off, while "An actual suffering strengthens" seems to zoom in on the dark vortex of energy that suffering can so cruelly manifest (see the interview for more on this movement). The beautifully named "An Auroral Light" spins lines like the finest of threads via careful and strategic use of the sustaining pedal (and Martin's soft touch); the set ends with the phantasmagoric play of "Whose Spokes a Dizzy Music Makes," tellingly rendered by Martin.

The touch Martin uses for the opening of the Prokofiev ("The Street Awakens") could hardly be more different: chiseled and exact. We enter straight away into specifically Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, where sustaining pedal is very much a seasoning to the main dish. Martin's readings of the five movements are beautifully characterized, nowhere more so than in the tender yet still often spiky "The Young Juliet." The cloud of sound towards the end of this movement is perfectly Prokofiev, and evaporates beautifully before the jackboots of "The Montagues and the Capulets" appear. But the central panel of this movement is heard here in a magnificently tender rendering.

A transcription "fashioned" from the piano concerto *The Passion of St Cecilia* (1985), the solo piano *Fantasy on St Cecilia* of 1996 is divided into three sections: "Her Struggle," "Her Passion" and "Her Martyrdom." The first is rugged and superbly performed by Martin, who relishes each and every challenge. More, Martin's sense of tone and sound color is simply wonderful. The starry pointillism that launches "Her Passion" soon rises to heart-based outbursts, while the shortest movement, "Her Martyrdom," finds extremes of subterranean depth against celestial delicacy. From the canyon to the stars, as Messiaen might have put it, only here the move is from the corporeal to the heavenly realms, and the piece ends with a crushing, dark blow. Astonishing writing, and played with the most steadfast assurance and belief.

The low octave gestures of the *Dutchman* transcription nestle perfectly next to this (as does, one might posit, the post-mortem status of the Dutchman). Martin's performance is noteworthy for her definition. The fury of the storms remains, but one can clearly hear the layerings, and the careful balance of the chords. While Shatin referenced Bach in the *Fantasy on St Cecilia*, here in Wagner/Liszt one can perhaps here a chorale-like slant to some of the writing

The opening of the Wagner/Liszt *Liebestod* is unabashed, encompassing in the briefest spell the entire drama that leads to those heady final moments of the music-drama. Transcendent love seems an apt way to close this sequence, and Martin manages to capture its essence.

This is an infinitely rewarding disc that demands repeated listening to get the most out of it.