



Gregory Berg

Soprani Compagni: Portraits of Women.

Lisa Dawson, Tammie Huntington, soprano; Phoenix Park-Kim, piano. (sopranicompagni.com; 73:42, 76:20)

Lori Laitman: *Fresh Patterns*: "It's all I have to bring today," "A Letter to Emily Dickinson," "Fresh Patterns." Jody J. Nagel: "Two Women." David Horace Davies: "By Night When Others Soundly Slept." Benjamin Williams: *Difficult Loves*: "Faces," "Fault," "In a Railroad Station." Todd Syswerda: "Who am I? The Story of Mary and Elizabeth." David Fuentes: *Mary & Martha*: "Inside My Name," "I Must Prepare," "We Each Have Our Part." Joopoong Kim: "Shin-Sa-Im-Dang." Doug Harbin: *Mark Twain Quotes*: "But Who Prays?" "Lord Save Us," "Forgiveness," "Let Us Not Be Too Particular," "Man Was Made," "No Sinner," "The Truth." Leanna Kirchoff: *Scrapbookers*. Philip Seward: *Juliet*. Jesse Ayers: *Beneath Suspicion*. Robert Denham: *The Way Home*. Bruce Trinkley: *The Rachel Carson Project*: "Opening," "A

Walk in the Woods," "Spring Song," "Silent Spring," "Rachel's Creed," "Finale."

This intriguing project came about for the most laudable of reasons. Sopranos Lisa Dawson and Tammie Huntington, faculty colleagues at Indiana Wesleyan University, were frustrated that there was so little repertoire for two sopranos, and that so much of what already existed was hemmed in by tired stereotypes and tropes involving romance between men and women. They were determined to inspire an array of skilled composers to compose works that would expand the two soprano repertoire while also creating meaningful "portraits of women" outside the realm of romantic relationships. They were eventually able to secure support from the Networking Initiative Grant from the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities as well as the Lilly Faculty Scholarship for Indiana Wesleyan University that allowed them to commission the new works presented in this impressive and fascinating recording.

Dawson and Huntington both possess impressive and exciting voices of gleaming brilliance and beauty. Moreover, their voices work very nicely together as much for their contrasts as for their similarities. Not surprisingly, for a project of this scope, some of these works suit them extremely well, while others sound a bit ill fitting from time to time. What remains consistent throughout is the earnestness and attentiveness of these performances. The singers clearly care about these pieces and one can sense their gratitude at being able to sing them. A special word of praise is owed to pianist Phoenix Park-Kim, a faculty

colleague of the two sopranos. Her playing is unfailingly assured and accomplished, no matter what challenges these works present, and she is a fully supportive and sensitive collaborator.

One striking aspect of this project is how it encompasses art song, opera, and cantata, although one senses a rather flexible approach to those labels. There is also a wider scope of style and difficulty level than one might expect. While most of these works were clearly conceived for the recital stage and meant for highly accomplished singers to perform, there are also pieces that feel like they were meant to be sung in church. This suggests that the invitation to these composers was a fairly open one, and the exciting variety of these works is thanks to that choice.

Perhaps the simplest work in this collection is Todd Syswerda's "Who am I? The Story of Mary and Elizabeth," which springs out of the story from the Gospel of Luke in which Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, rejoices in the news that Mary is to be the mother of the promised Messiah. The music is heartfelt and suits the two singers extremely well, although some may find the work lacking in substance or sophistication. Another biblically-based work is David Fuentes's *Mary & Martha*, a three song set that conveys with theatrical flair the familiar story of the two sisters who react very differently to an unexpected visit from Jesus. This piece is cast in an intricate neoclassical style that places it much more in the realm of the recital stage than the church sanctuary. One must appreciate how the singers are able to scale down their sizable instruments to navigate these complicated melodic lines so expertly.

Space does not permit detailed discussion of each work to be found

on these two disks, but some highlights merit mention. *Difficult Loves* by Benjamin Williams features three Sara Teasdale poems that take the listener into three distinct directions, expressively. It's a fascinating work. "Two Women" by Jody J. Nagel is a setting of an anonymous text that spells out the stark contrast between the lives of two very different women. It is thoughtfully crafted and beautifully sung. Perhaps the most bracingly modern music in this collection is Doug Harbin's *Mark Twain Quotes*, but even in the midst of its steep musical challenges one can still sense the twinkle in Twain's eyes as he posed intriguing questions and made his whimsical observations about the world. It's an entertaining way to finish out the art song portion of this release.

The disk devoted to opera and cantata yields rich rewards for the listener. Perhaps the strongest work is Philip Seward's *Juliet*, which amounts to an operatic setting of an imagined scene between the Nurse and Lady Capulet from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It is a fascinating idea that is beautifully executed and impressively performed. Robert Denham's *The Way Home* is an emotionally probing scene in which a middle-aged woman is driving her elderly mother to a rest home that will be her new home. A whole world of love, sadness, and regret is conveyed in this eight-minute work, and Huntington and Dawson do their part to bring it alive. *Beneath Suspicion*, an opera by Jesse Ayers, is drawn from the extraordinary true story of a southern woman named Elizabeth Van Lew whose father was one of Richmond's wealthiest slave owners. Upon his death, Elizabeth freed all of her slaves and became an ardent abolitionist who worked to

secure intelligence for General Grant on the activity of the Confederate Army. Her most valuable collaborator in her espionage efforts was one of her freed slaves, Mary Bowser, whose keen intelligence and courage were essential to their success. Ayers weaves themes from such songs of the period as "Dixie," "Go Down, Moses," and "Aura Lee" into his carefully crafted score, and these two remarkable women are brought vividly to life.

The aforementioned works are all emphatic successes, but even the pieces that are more problematic deserve consideration. Bruce Trinkley's *One Life* is a cantata inspired by the writings of Rachel Carson, the woman who played a central role in the creation of the modern ecology movement through such groundbreaking works as *Silent Spring*. It is a laudable undertaking but one that is undermined by occasionally clumsy writing. *Scrapbookers*, by Leanna Kirchoff, is an extended scene in which two sisters are preparing a scrapbook to celebrate their parents' golden wedding anniversary. Some will undoubtedly enjoy the work's simple sincerity and sweetness, while others will find it a bit saccharine. Whatever its limitations as a score, it is a lovely vehicle for Huntington and Dawson, and they sing it most persuasively.

This release includes one work that actually preceded the grant that made the project possible. Lori Laitman's *Fresh Patterns* is a set of three songs commissioned by Steven Jordheim for his daughter and one of her teachers. The work opens with Laitman's exquisite setting of Emily Dickinson's "It's all I have to bring today," one of her finest and most famous poems. That is followed by "A Letter to Emily Dickinson," a text by contemporary poet Annie Finch in which she offers

heartfelt thanks to Dickinson for her legacy. The work concludes with a stroke of genius as Laitman combines the first and second songs into a beautiful duet that seems to draw these two gifted poets from two different centuries into the same time and place. It is a work of extraordinary beauty and impact, and it served as the inspiration for the ensuing Soprani Compagni project. (Laitman was kind enough to allow the work to be included in this recording.) Sadly, both sopranos sound a bit ill at ease in their respective solos, struggling to bring their large and vibrant voices under control, but they recover to deliver a fine performance of the culminating duet.

All in all, this is the kind of exciting project that one hopes will inspire others to pursue similar ventures. Anybody interested in learning more about this project or any of the commissioned works should go to sopranicompagni.com. The website also includes full texts as well as information on how to order this impressive recording or scores of these compositions.

Allan Blank: Song Cycles with Double Bass and Piano. Catherine Thieme, mezzo soprano; Jennifer Miller, soprano; Andrew Kohn, double bass; Robert Thieme, Robert Frankenberg, piano. (Albany TROY 1634; 64:04)

Poems from the Holocaust: "De Profundis: A Song of Ascents," "At Terezin," "Shpieltzeit," "Man Proposes, God Disposes," "Makh Tsu Di Eygelekh," "The Butterfly," "Kaddish." *Introduction, Five Poems, Interludes & Conclusion:* "Introduction," "Let Evening Come," "Interlude I," "Peonies at Dusk,"

"Interlude II," "Finding a Long Gray Hair," "Interlude III," "The Thimble," "Interlude IV," "Otherwise," "Conclusion."

The late Allan Blank (1925–2013) was a gifted musician who divided his artistic energies between academic endeavor and professional composition, managing to achieve true excellence in both spheres. He taught composition at several different colleges and universities, with the last twenty years of his academic career spent at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. This disk serves as a lovely tribute to Blank, both in the presentation of two of his finest vocal works, as well as in the participation of an array of musicians from the region who knew and respected him.

What is especially notable about this release is that these two song cycles are dramatically distinct from each other in approach and style. In fact, one would hardly imagine that they came from the pen of the same composer, except for the expert craftsmanship that both works demonstrate as well as their vivid responsiveness to the texts at hand. One does not often encounter a composer with such an extraordinarily wide range of expression.

Poems from the Holocaust is a deeply affecting work that combines two Yiddish poems with three poems written by children at Terezin, the infamous Nazi camp that was used to present to the outside world a deceptively positive image that masked the horrific reality of these camps. We are treated to unbridled expressions of anger, bewilderment, pain, and despair in the texts themselves; Blank's music takes those texts and gives them still greater life in a way that only the music of a truly great composer can.

The cycle begins with "De Profundis," an unaccompanied double bass solo of almost unbearable poignancy; the starkness of that unadorned melodic line opens up the listener to receive what follows. The first song of the cycle, "At Terezin," is a text that is not conventionally poetic at all; it is just the raw and unfiltered complaints of a child who is angered and bewildered by the awful place in which he inexplicably finds himself living and lists just some of the things he hates about it. The song extends its emotional impact beyond the text itself as the song ends in a postlude for bass and piano where we sense a pall of hopelessness slowly enveloping the youngster. It is nothing short of painful to find one's self drawn to that same dark place, almost as if we are breathing the same air as young

Teddy, who wrote the poem. This song is followed by a Yiddish poem titled "Shpieltzeit," in which a parent gently yet firmly tells a child that they must care for their toys. The song feels like a lullaby, but one that is laced with a sort of broken sweetness.

"Man Proposes, God Disposes" is actually a poem that combines several different textual fragments from a number of people known to have been imprisoned at Terezin. The central theme is that somebody who was wealthy and secure back in Prague finds himself poor and helpless at Terezin. Blank's music perfectly encapsulates the biting cynicism of the text with its pungent dissonance and jagged melodic angles. From there, we descend to the sorrowful depths of "Makh Tsu Di Eygelekh," a Yiddish poem written by Isaiah Spiegel af-

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ter the death by deprivation of his daughter in the Jewish ghetto. The poem was eventually translated and published in the aptly named collection *Bearing the Unbearable: Yiddish and Polish Poetry in the Ghettos and Concentration Camps*. Blank sets this heartbreaking text as a tender lullaby that imperceptibly becomes a lament. In many ways, this song is the emotional heart of the entire cycle. It is followed by the best known text in the cycle, Pavel Friedman's "The Butterfly," which directly inspired Celeste Raspanti's touching play *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. The gossamer grace of Blank's music perfectly conveys the image of a bright yellow butterfly providing a fleeting image of life and hope in the face of utter despair. The cycle draws to a close with an instrumental Kaddish that at first is mired in sorrow before slowly gaining a more radiant sense of purpose and faith. One cannot imagine a more ideal way to finish this rich and deeply touching work.

Mezzo soprano Catherine Thieme sings these songs with the profound sensitivity that they deserve. Her sound is warm and beautiful and her diction is crystal clear yet entirely natural. Pianist Robert Thieme is an impressive and unerring partner in every way, no matter what emotional extremes are called for. Andrew Kohn folds in the line of the double bass with great care and musicality. Together, these three musicians offer up a seamless, heartfelt performance of this deeply felt masterpiece. Nothing could be a finer tribute to the composer and to his wife, Margot, who herself was a Holocaust survivor.

The second work on this disk is cut from very different musical cloth, but is every bit as touching. *Introduction, Five Poems, Interludes and Conclusion*

is inspired by the poetry of Jane Kenyon, a richly gifted writer whose life and career was cut short by cancer in 1995 when she was just 48 years old. At the time of her death, she was married to Donald J. Hall, a renowned poet in his own right, with whom she was living in rural New Hampshire. Kenyon's legacy vibrantly lives on not only in her own poetry, but also in the many poems that her husband wrote about her and their life together. *Journal of Singing* readers may remember a review in this column of Herschel Garfein's *Mortality Mansions*, a meticulously crafted work written to memorialize Kenyon; it offered up a dozen of Hall's poems plus Kenyon's own "Otherwise" as its emotionally searing final movement (Gregory Berg, "The Listener's Gallery," *Journal of Singing* 75, no. 2 [November/December 2018]: 233–234). That same exquisite poem serves as the final movement of Blank's song cycle, which is a similarly poignant tribute to Kenyon.

One of the best aspects of Kenyon's poetry is how it can serve up a predominant shade of emotion with contrasting feelings just beneath the surface. Blank's music manages to embody that same complexity with true mastery. This is especially true of the first song, "Let Evening Come," which has a gentle tenderness that barely conceals a thread of pain beneath it. The poem talks of how the coming of evening is nothing to fear, especially because "God does not leave us comfortless." The poem itself is breathtakingly beautiful, and in Blank's setting of it that beauty is enhanced.

As its title suggests, the cycle is constructed with an introduction, interludes, and a conclusion in alternation with the songs. These instrumental passages have a beautiful way

of both ushering us out of what we have just heard and drawing us into what comes next. As for the songs themselves, they are crafted with utmost care to the point where the music feels almost inevitable, as though it had been conceived in the same moment that the poem itself was written. "Peonies at Dusk" is written in praise of white peonies and how they are even more lovely at sunset. The delicacy of Blank's music is a perfect mirror to this lovely poem. We are treated to different colors in the amusing "Finding a Long Gray Hair" and the almost mystic "The Thimble," each of which chronicles the interesting feelings that can arise from the simplest things encountered in our daily lives. The aforementioned "Otherwise" is a deeply moving expression of gratitude for life's simplest blessings, and brings the cycle to a radiant conclusion.

Soprano Jennifer Miller's voice is an uncommonly beautiful instrument that she uses with ease and complete security. One could only fault her for the fleeting moments when it's difficult to catch the text, although the composer bears some responsibility for that. Pianist Robert Frankenberg melds with Miller as though they were lifelong partners. Once again, double bass soloist Andrew Kohn makes an invaluable contribution to the proceedings with playing that belies our assumptions about what this instrument can do. One would scarcely guess that the double bass could be played with this kind of grace and agility, but Kohn delivers a performance that shatters those assumptions.

The album includes full texts, biographies of all participants, and brief essays on each of the cycles.

Pilar Lorengar: Voice & Mystery.

Arturo Méndiz, director. (ArtHaus Musik 109331; 54:00)

One might be forgiven for regarding a documentary film about Pilar Lorengar (1928–1996) with a mix of surprise and skepticism. After all, the Spanish soprano never achieved the renown of such contemporaries as Leontyne Price, Joan Sutherland, Renata Telaldi, Leonie Rysanek, and Birgit Nilsson. Perhaps if she had come to prominence in a generation less crowded with superstars, Lorengar would have achieved a level of fame commensurate with her superb gifts. She possessed one of the most strikingly beautiful voices of her generation and used it with flawless consistency, ease, and musicality. Although she demonstrated a fair amount of caution in her repertoire choices, Lorengar still managed to carve out an impressive legacy in roles as wide ranging as Pamina, Violetta, Elsa, and Tosca. But for all her excellence as an artist, Lorengar had no interest in fame. Her career was all about the simple joy of singing. This was amply evident in her performances and was a big reason why both audiences and colleagues loved her as much as they did; it's also one reason why her career unfolded without the slightest hint of controversy or unpleasantness. This would seem to be yet another reason for documentarians to bypass Lorengar in favor of singers with more “colorful” stories.

Fortunately, filmmaker Arturo Méndiz knew better, and he has crafted a compelling film that explores the difficulty of Lorengar's personal life in contrast with her radiant career on the stage. Born to a single mother amidst brutal poverty in the small

community of Zaragoza, Lorengar's rise to greatness must be one of the most astounding and unlikely rags to riches stories in recent opera history. One of the best choices that Méndiz makes is to eschew a simple chronological narrative in favor of a framework that jumps back and forth between her difficult early years and the sweet success of her professional prime. That alternation serves to potently underscore the contrast between her early misery and later glory.

Méndiz has gathered together a number of people who knew Lorengar well. They include her two surviving brothers, two stepdaughters, and several of her dearest longtime friends. We also hear from two singers who knew her well: Teresa Berganza, a fellow Spaniard who sang often with Lorengar early in her career, and Karen Armstrong, a soprano whose career, like Lorengar's, was based at the Berlin Opera. We also hear from Spanish conductor Jesus Lopez-Cobos, a frequent collaborator with Lorengar who conducted the performance of *Tosca* in Berlin that drew her opera career to a close in the summer of 1990, when she was still singing well. There are also excerpts from an interview with Lorengar that would appear to have been recorded at some

point in the late 1960s or early 1970s. They are delightful and revealing, and one only wishes that we could hear much more than is included here.

There is also a generous sampling of Lorengar's singing, including video footage of her in live performances of *Don Giovanni*, *Manon Lescaut*, and a concert performance of the love duet from *Madama Butterfly*. There are a couple of enticing moments from the 1952 Spanish film *Último día*, in which a young Lorengar sang several zarzuela arias. It was this film that helped pave the way for her eventual breakthrough. There is footage of a coaching with Lorin Maazel before Lorengar opened a new production of *Tosca* at the Berlin Opera. The film is also enriched by audio excerpts from two of her most important roles, Mimi and Violetta. Unfortunately, these tantalizing highlights leave the viewer hungry for more. One wishes that the filmmakers could have included an appendix in which the material from which these excerpts were drawn could be viewed in their entirety. Nevertheless, this film offers up a rich and illuminating portrait of one of the most gifted singers of her generation and her extraordinary rise from childhood deprivation and sorrow to the pinnacle of her profession.

When the full-grown poet came,
 Out spake pleased Nature (the round impassive globe,
 with all its show of day and night,) saying, He is mine;
 But out spake too the Soul of man, proud, jealous and unreconciled,
 Nay, he is mine alone;
 —Then the full-grown poet stood between the two, and took each
 by the hand;
 And to-day and ever so stands, as blender, uniter, tightly holding hands,
 Which he will never release until he reconciles the two,
 And wholly and joyously blends them.

Walt Whitman, “When the full-grown poet came”