



Gregory Berg

***The Sun is Love: Song Cycles and Piano Music by Gwyneth Walker.***

Michaëlle Areyza, soprano; Jamie Shaak, piano. (Proteus 0015; 51:48)

"Rhythms of the North Country"; "Semplice"; *Though Love Be A Day*: "Thy fingers make early flowers," "lily has a rose," "after all white horses are in bed," "maggie and milly and molly and may," "Still"; *Mornings Innocent*: "Women Should Be Pedestals," "In Autumn," "I Will Be Earth"; *The Sun is Love*: "Circling the Sun," "Quietness," "Flirtation," "The Sunrise Ruby," "Dualities," "A Waterbird (Flying into the Sun)."

One of the highlights of the 2016 NATS conference in Chicago was a publisher showcase performance titled "Songs of Love and Adventure: The Vocal Music of Gwyneth Walker." It was a brilliant and moving celebration of one of our most accomplished and beloved contemporary composers. What made it even more exciting is the fact that Dr. Walker herself was present to hear these beautiful performances of her work and to receive the accolades of all who were present. It

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was clear confirmation that she holds a very special place in the hearts of all who love contemporary art song.

Gwyneth Walker left a promising career in academia in the early 1980s when she realized that her responsibilities as a music professor at Oberlin were diverting too much of her time and energy away from composition. With firm resolve, she returned to her native Vermont and lived for the next several decades on a dairy farm, where both the lifestyle and landscape allowed her to flourish as a composer in truly spectacular fashion. Dr. Walker approaches her 70th birthday with well over 300 compositions to her credit, including rapturously received choral works, art songs, chamber pieces, and orchestral literature. She has approached her career in very pragmatic fashion and built an impressive network of ensembles and organizations that are eager to perform her works and commission new ones. It is a matter beyond the high quality of her music; she is also a consummate professional who views every opportunity to create a new composition as a priceless opportunity for which she is profoundly grateful. Undoubtedly, she would attribute her exceptional work ethic and humble graciousness to her Quaker background and to the wider community of musicians of which she is glad to be a part.

The disk at hand is a collection of three Gwyneth Walker song cycles, and all three vividly demonstrate her superb instincts for igniting the full potential of a given text. There is something both musically and emotionally lavish about her songs, a sense that the composer has drawn deeply from an inexhaustible well of ideas and inspiration. This is especially true of *Though Love Be A Day*, which features

four poems by E.E.Cummings, plus a remarkable poem of her own. Walker composed this set in 1979 while she was on the faculty at Oberlin; it was written for a student at the time named Kathryn Bennett. The composer pivots gracefully between the impassioned ardor of "Thy fingers make early flowers," the frolicking fun of "lily has a rose," the exquisite poise of "after all white horses are in bed," and the saucy attitude of "maggie and milly and molly and may." She not only embraces and expresses the emotional heart of each of these disparate texts, but also manages to create an indelible line of continuity between them. These are four distinct songs rendered by a single voice capable of expressing a limitless array of emotions and moods. "Still" draws the set to a gorgeous and satisfying conclusion. Clearly, Walker is a composer who not only creates wonderful songs but also knows exactly how to tie them together in just the right combination and order.

The story behind *Mornings Innocent*, a setting of four poems by May Swenson, demonstrates how luck is sometimes necessary to draw artists from different worlds together. In this case, Walker knew nothing of Swenson or her writing until she happened to come across her obituary in the *New York Times*. Walker was so intrigued by the brief examples of her poetry contained in the article that she actually took it upon herself to travel to New York City for Swenson's memorial service, where she had the opportunity to hear still more of her work. She ultimately secured permission from Swenson's estate to set these four texts to music, and they turned out to be the foundation for an enchanting song cycle that Walker composed in 1993. "Women Should Be Pedestals"

parades one outrageous and outmoded notion after another of the supposedly “proper” role of women in relation to men. It is Walker’s charming music that makes us smile rather than cringe. The three subsequent songs are all more serious and lyric in nature, and each one is breathtakingly beautiful in its own way. One should take note of how she repeats certain words and phrases in “I Will Be Earth” in a way that extracts deeper meaning from the poem without tampering with its essence. Only a composer with a keen poetic sense is likely to manage such a feat so sensitively and effectively.

The disk concludes with *The Sun is Love*, which is based on six poems by Jelaluddin Rumi as translated into English by Coleman Barks. Walker clearly finds deep resonance with these texts that originated in the 13th century. In her own commentary, she refers to this particular cycle as “a flowing set of songs intended to be presented as a whole.” There is a seamlessness to this set that is quite captivating, as though almost nothing divides these songs from one another. It creates a palpable sensation of embarking on a powerful emotional journey through the heart of what it means to love and be loved. This may be the most technically demanding of the three cycles, for both singer and pianist, but those technical challenges never draw undue attention to themselves. They seem instead like an entirely inevitable expression of the deeply layered passion of these texts. By the time we reach the soaring climax of “A Waterbird,” with the singer almost desperately singing “what I want” over and over again, we are thoroughly exhausted in the best sense of the word!

Soprano Michelle Areyzaga and pianist Jamie Shaak deliver perfor-

mances of stunning beauty, clarity, and eloquence. Ms. Areyzaga’s voice has a luminous radiance from top to bottom, and she deploys that sound with elegant ease in even the most taxing of these songs. Beyond the exquisite sound she produces, the soprano also has a limitless palette of emotional and expressive colors and inflections from which she draws. One seldom encounters singing that is this richly communicative yet so unfailingly lovely. Ms. Shaak is confronted with one formidable challenge after another in these extravagantly scored accompaniments, but she dispatches them with astonishing effortlessness. What is especially impressive is how she plays with such unbridled passion, yet remains a most sensitive and responsive partner. The disk also features her in two of Ms. Walker’s piano solos, “Semplice” and “Rhythms of the North Country.” The latter is an arresting soundscape of the natural world in which the piano is played in both conventional and unconventional ways. It’s a fascinating piece and one hopes that the composer will find the time to craft many more piano solos.

The disk includes texts as well as brief biographies of the composer and the two musicians. For information on the music, one is directed to the composer’s website, [gwynethwalker.com](http://gwynethwalker.com), where a plethora of resources are easily accessible and well worth exploring.

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**Visione: Luigi Mantegani 1894–1989 Selected Songs.** Roberta Canzian, soprano; Enza Ferrari, piano. (*Visione Music*; 26:10)

“Il Vespero,” “Benedizione,” “Novembre,” “Romanza,” “Visione,” “Quando più

ferve,” “Autunno e amore,” “Canzone d’autunno,” “Primavera.”

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Not everything buried is treasure, and in the course of digging for it one is likely to encounter a plethora of worthless tin cans along the way. What keeps people digging is the fervent hope that something truly special and even precious awaits discovery. Luigi Mantegani would seem to be such a treasure: a gifted and accomplished composer with an exceptionally interesting and inspiring life story, yet someone whose name and legacy are almost completely forgotten. Even in Italy, his beloved homeland, very few people are likely to know his music or anything about him. The recording at hand serves as an effective introduction to this composer’s music and leaves us wanting more.

According to the liner notes, Mantegani was just a youngster when he was blinded due to a doctor’s incompetence. Fortunately, his family was able to secure a fine education for him, including musical training at the Configliachi Institute for the Blind in Padova. Mantegani went on to enjoy a varied and successful career as a church choirmaster, organist, private piano teacher, professor, and even a pianist for silent films. (We’re told that among his many piano students was a certain young bishop by the name of Albino Luciani, who just a few years later would be elected Pope John Paul I.) Mantegani’s compositional efforts were focused mostly on sacred music, although he apparently composed operas as well. Sadly, the notes are a bit stingy with specifics on any of his compositions.

Alas, the recording itself is stingy as well. We’re treated to less than a half hour of music, and all ten songs seem to have been drawn from the same bolt

of musical fabric. Nevertheless, they are utterly enchanting songs, and one can easily imagine them finding a place in the recitals of singers in search of fresh and rarely heard repertoire. The music is lush and expressive, bringing to mind the romantic songs of his compatriot Stefan Donaudy. The difference is that Mantegani's music seems to have been subtly flavored with the influence of jazz, particularly in the colorful harmonic language of the accompaniment. The vocal line tends not to leap wildly about, but even within its rather modest range it takes all kinds of beguiling turns. The texts are set with an eye toward general mood rather than careful specificity, but one must appreciate the natural sync of words to melody and the consistent loveliness of these melodies.

Soprano Roberta Canzian is ideally suited for this music, with a lovely voice and plaintive expressiveness that calls to mind Romanian soprano Angela Gheorghiu. Canzian seems to have an uncanny affinity for Mantegani's melodic lines, which she sings with creamy, luscious beauty and shapes with sensitive expressiveness. Given the composer's exceptional pianistic skills, one might expect the accompaniments of his songs to be ferociously demanding. They actually pose perfectly reasonable challenges that Enza Ferrari more than surmounts. In fact, some of the most exquisite moments in these songs are delivered by Ferrari, who draws all kinds of rich, varied colors from the piano, while remaining in perfect concord with the soprano. This is musical collaboration at its very finest.

One has to be grateful for the extensive liner notes that help us know who Mantegani was and what made him significant, but one might wish that even more information had been

shared about the scope of his compositions. This is an enhanced disk that not only allows one to hear these fine performances, but also to view the score of each song. It's one more way that this important release may actually allow interested artists to have the pleasure of singing these songs for themselves.

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**Gayla Blaisdell Performs the Songs of Ross and Paulus.** Gayla Bauer Blaisdell, soprano; Elaine M. Ross, piano; Dorothy Henderson, trumpet. (55:21)

Elaine Ross: "Will the Wind Whisper?" "Only Then Can We Smile"; *Four Emily Dickinson Songs*: "Heart, We Will Forget Him," "Why Do They Shut Me Out Of Heaven?" "Will There Really be a Morning?" "There Came a Wind Like a Bugle"; Stephen Paulus: *Erotic Spirits*: "Eros," "Together We Celebrate," "How Sweet," "Love's Delicacy," "Doing, a Filthy Pleasure Is, and Short," "Alone, Lonely," "Fireflies," "Late Evening."

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The world of music is still mourning the unexpected death in 2014 of composer Stephen Paulus, one of the finest and most highly regarded choral music composers of the last half century. Two of his motets, "Pilgrim's Hymn" and "Hymn to America," are among the most often performed works of their kind, but they are only the tip of a most formidable iceberg. Paulus crafted more than 600 works, with many written as composer-in-residence for both the Minnesota Orchestra and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Among his most notable compositions was the Holocaust-themed oratorio *To Be Certain of the Dawn*, as well as his opera *The Postman Rings Twice*, which is the most frequently performed of his

twelve operas. A staggering array of singers, including Samuel Ramey, Elizabeth Futral, Jessye Norman, Håkan Hagegård, and Evelyn Lear, commissioned works from him. Not many composers of our time can boast of such a legacy.

Art songs are not the first thing one thinks of with Paulus, but he composed more than sixty of them, including several highly regarded cycles such as *All My Pretty Ones*, *The Long Shadow of Lincoln*, and *Bittersuite*. *Erotic Spirits* was actually conceived for soprano and orchestra and premiered by Deborah Voigt and the Augusta Symphony Orchestra in 2004. The performance here is of the composer's own piano reduction, and one has not the slightest sense that this is the pale echo of a richer original. It is an endlessly colorful and evocative work, with Paulus drawing vivid inspiration from this array of ancient texts on various themes of love and passion. As for the vocal writing, it displays Paulus's faultless instincts both for setting text and for crafting grateful vocal lines, although the tessitura of some of these songs is unkind. Be forewarned that if one's acquaintance with the music of Stephen Paulus is confined to his best known choral anthems, then these songs are apt to be a shocking surprise. There is a brash inventiveness at play here that is worlds away from the soothing radiance of his "Hymn to America." One should listen especially for the lengthy piano introductions that create a rich and compelling backdrop for each and every song. His use of dissonance is fairly daring but always to the service of the text at hand.

The recording opens with six songs by the disk's pianist, Elaine Ross, who is a theory professor at Ohio University and a prolific composer

in a number of different genres. Her *Four Emily Dickinson Songs* tread on familiar ground, since three of the four poems are part of Aaron Copland's iconic set of Dickinson songs. One cannot say that Dr. Ross is Copland's equal when it comes to seizing the emotional heart of these texts. On the other hand, her own musical ideas are never less than arresting, and one cannot help but appreciate the vivid emotional profile of these songs. One intriguing choice she makes is to repeat certain words or phrases for emotional effect. The device works perfectly in "Why Do They Shut Me Out of Heaven?" as she has the singer repeat the single word "why" over and over again, as though to convey a sense of bewilderment, rather than the outright anger of Copland's setting. She makes a less persuasive choice in "Heart, We Will Forget Him" when she repeats the entire poem a second time. For all the eloquence and beauty of the music, it's hard to see what, if anything, is gained by such a retread-

ing of text. The stark simplicity of Copland's setting is much more effective. Overall, however, Ross's settings are well worth hearing. Rounding out the recording are two songs that feature original texts by the composer. "Will the Wind Whisper?" is a highly mystic poem that evokes some of Ross's most intriguing musical shadings. "Only Then Can We Smile" was inspired by the composer's visit to Ground Zero, and is intended as a memorial to those who lost their lives on 9/11. The song combines wildly contrasting moods of grief, anger and hope. The addition of a trumpet obbligato, beautifully played by Dorothy Henderson, greatly enhances the emotional impact of the song.

Soprano Gayla Blaisdell possesses a big, brilliant voice that sounds tailor made for some of opera's most intimidating roles. Unfortunately, her gifts are not ideally suited for the demands of these particular songs or for the relative intimacy of the recital stage. It's a shame that she can't spin

these melodic lines with more ease and purity. One also regrets that the merciless tessitura of many of these songs leads to squally, strident singing where effortless bloom is needed. Nevertheless, there are exciting moments galore, including some thrilling high B flats in "Eros" that make one hungry to hear this artist in music better aligned to her skills. Elaine Ross is an exemplary pianist, and her convincing conquest of Paulus's fiendishly difficult accompaniments is the single most impressive facet of this disk.

Biographies of the artists are included along with brief introductory information for each of the works. Unfortunately, no texts are included.



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New Year met me somewhat  
 sad:  
 Old Year leaves me tired,  
 Stripped of favourite things I  
 had  
 Baulked of much desired:  
 Yet farther on my road to-day  
 God willing, farther on my  
 way.

New Year coming on apace  
 What have you to give me?  
 Bring you scathe, or bring you  
 grace,  
 Face me with an honest face;  
 You shall not deceive me:  
 Be it good or ill, be it what you  
 will,  
 It needs shall help me on my  
 road,  
 My rugged way to heaven,  
 please God.

Christina Rossetti,  
 "Old and New Year Ditties"