

Lita Grier: *Songs from Spoon River*

Michelle Areyzaga and Elizabeth Norman (soprano) Scott Ramsay (tenor): Alexander Tall, Levi Hernandez and Robert Sims (baritone): Welz Kauffman and William Billingham (piano): Anne Bach (oboe): Tina Laughlin (percussion); Chicago Children's Choir, Josephine Lee, conductor. Cedille records CDL 112 (2009)

For fans of contemporary American art song, the new recording of songs by Lita Grier is a must-hear. Following a thirty-year hiatus, Grier's compositional career has blossomed with new life, resulting in no less than five world premiere recordings on this disc. Sung by rising vocalists and accompanied by superb pianists, Grier's songs come to vibrant life. The Chicago Children's Choir, conducted by Josephine Lee, performs the final group of songs, *Reflections of a Peacemaker*. This disc is representative of Grier's ability to create a harmonic environment that enhances the interpretation of the text. Even the most dissonant moments add to the expressive nature of these songs, never detracting from the declamation of the text. Her piano accompaniments are beautifully supportive of the voice, often weaving thoughtful countermelodies around the vocal line.

The set of five Songs for Children is first on the disc. Although they were composed over a thirty-seven year period, they are united by a youthful freshness and lightness of approach. The piano creates an aural environment for each song, from rolling waves in "The Seashell", and "Someone" to chirping birds in "The Bluebird". Soprano Michelle Areyzaga quickly substantiates her fine reputation as a song recitalist and chamber musician through a translucent tone that shimmers across the wide range of these songs. She communicates text particularly well in a high tessitura, whether singing over spare accompaniment or at the dramatic climax of the cycle. The tone color is well chosen, reflecting the simplicity of the poetry but not neglecting the lush sounds audiences have come to expect from her singing. Welz Kauffman provides a dramatic and theatrical accompaniment for each song and balances the needs of the voice beautifully.

*Sneezles* (1972) is an innovative chamber work for soprano, oboe, piano, and percussion based on a text from A.A. Milne's collection *Now We are Six*. It is the only work from Grier's compositional hiatus. Areyzaga's characterizations of Christopher Robin and the doctor enhance this charming childhood story. A particularly intriguing element of the work is its use of percussion, admirably performed by Tina Laughlin.

The set of five Songs from *A Shropshire Lad* (1955) is one of Grier's earliest works, written while still in her teens. Robert Sims' warm baritone voice is a perfect choice for these songs. Unfortunately, the continuity of the cycle is interrupted by abrupt starts on several tracks, giving the impression that the listener has missed the first one or two notes of the song, and this is not the only time the problem occurs on the disc.

Grier composed *Two Songs from Emily Dickinson* during her student days at UCLA. The musical and emotional maturity of these songs presage Grier's success as a composer of vocal works. Areyzaga's warm and light approach carries one away into the world of the poet. The climax of "I Cannot Live with You" nearly escapes the soprano, as her emotional portrayal taxes her highest pitches, but that moment does not negate the beauty of the sounds that precede it. Equally dramatic is "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed," which demands superb musical and technical skill from the singer and the pianist in its watercolor musical context.

The song cycle *Songs from Spoon River* is the centerpiece of this disc and is the product of three separate commissions from Ravinia Festival CEO Welz Kauffman for the Steans Institute for Young Artists. The first four songs and the finale were commissioned in 2004; song five, "Anne Rutledge" was added in 2009 in commemoration of the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. The cycle requires exceptional singing and characterization from a high soprano, lyric or mezzo soprano, tenor and baritone. With poetry from Edgar Lee Masters' "Spoon River Anthology", the listener is introduced to the residents of the cemetery and their stories. Of the ten songs, three stand out as the most effectively communicated: Sarah Brown, sung by Areyzaga in a lush and haunting performance: "Margaret Fuller Slack" sung bitterly and beautifully by Elizabeth Norman; and "Anne Rutledge" featuring the entire ensemble. As in *A Shropshire Lad*, moments of abrupt transition occur between tracks and disturb the dramatic arc of the cycle.

*Reflections of a Peacemaker* was commissioned by the Chicago Children's Choir to poetry by Mattie J.T. Stepanek. Stepanek's brief life ended in 2004 but his poetry has been celebrated for its wisdom, courage, and beauty. Grier effectively sets these texts with sparkling harmonies and soaring melodies, capturing the excitement and enthusiasm of children, while paying homage to the profundity of Stepanek's thoughts. These songs serve as a lovely bookend to a recording that reaches into the depth of human experience as seen by the living and the dead.

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