

Heidi Louise Williams, Champion of the Great American Piano Sonatas

BY PETER BURWASSER

It looks like all of your recorded output to date (correct me if I am wrong) is American music. Other than the obvious considerations that you are, yourself, American, and that the music is terrific, is there something in particular that draws you to this repertoire?

You are nearly correct! My recordings on Albany to date have featured American composers, and on Naxos, music of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, but on Neos I recorded a large chamber work by Czech composer Ladislav Kubík on an album bearing the same title, *Flashes of Light*. On another recent release, I recorded the second movement of Ravel's G-Major Piano Concerto in a rather "hip" arrangement by Luis Rivera for percussion ensemble, directed and engineered by the amazing percussionist John W. Parks IV, on an album entitled *The Percustary Insectarium*. Earlier recordings have featured solo and chamber works by Bach, Chopin, Debussy, Beethoven, Franck, Dvořák, and others, but these have been distributed and sold privately rather than commercially.

I listened to the Percustary Insectarium on YouTube. It is both weird and beautiful! But let's get back to your special commitment to American music.

It has been a special privilege to champion American works—a number of them by living composers with whom I have collaborated—in my recordings. Having completed several projects featuring very recent music, for this album I wanted to reach further back into the 20th century, bringing together a program of works highlighting this fascinating hybridity of European and American influences within the sonata genre. These four sonatas share a compelling epic quality, featuring broad structures, soaring vocal lines, and robust pianism, all of which have roots in the great Romantic traditions. Significantly, each of these composers was devoted to music for the voice. Not surprisingly, the same intense lyricism permeates the fabric of their instrumental writing. Walker and Floyd in particular were exceptional pianists—following a trajectory of great pianist-composers including Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin, Bartók, and Prokofiev. Griffes and Barber, too, were excellent pianists whose performances are well documented. Added to these qualities is the fusion of European Classical forms and aesthetics with musical inspirations from the diverse American landscape. For me, these threads weave a tapestry of astonishing dimensions in power, poignance, and purpose, but beyond this, I feel a genuine connection to this music, with which my own background and musical journey resonate. I myself am of mixed European and Native-American descent—so perhaps this fusion runs deeper within me than I can explain!

The Griffes Sonata is quite a gust of energy! I have to say, this extraordinary music sounds European rather than American to me, in line with the fin de siècle confections of Scriabin, Rachmaninoff et al. Your thoughts?

One can surely hear the fruits of Griffes's European musical training in the rich Romanticism and thematic cohesiveness of his sonata, as well as his indebtedness to Debussy in the shimmering iridescence of colors and timbres influenced by non-Western sources, making lush use of exotic and synthetic scales, gamelan-type textures and the like. The fluidity of his phrases and the mercurial, impetuous energy, at times frenetic, does bear great similarity to the musical aesthetic of Scriabin in particular. Griffes studied in Berlin with pianist Gottfried Galston, who was a student of Ferruccio Busoni, and so it is not surprising that Griffes's pianistic idiom exemplifies the Romantic richness of textures and rhapsodic expression similarly found in works by composers such as Rachmaninoff.

Okay, so what makes it American?

To me, there is another side to this amazing sonata, which is recognized as one of the most genuinely significant piano pieces of our country's first 200 years, and a pioneer contribution to 20th-century American

piano literature. Aaron Copland, who once stated that Griffes was among a handful of American composers who “stood out” for him, credited him with paving the way for future American composers, contributing a “sense of the adventurous . . . of being thoroughly alive to the newest trends in world music, and to the stimulus that might be derived from such contact.” As revolutionary as Debussy was in his constant search for non-Western musical inspirations, Griffes also was a revolutionary, blending a vast diversity of Western, non-Western, and original elements into his mature period of composition, to which this sonata belongs. The fearless abandon that characterizes so much of this extraordinary music is something I feel has a distinctly American spirit about it: that of dangerous adventure, probing uncharted wilderness and untamed terrain.

George Walker’s sonata has such an elegant Neoclassical profile, more so than the companion pieces on your recital. What are the American elements in the music, as you hear this?

I really like this word you use, elegant! Indeed, this sonata is perhaps the most purely “instrumental” in concept, and in some ways, more abstract or cool-tempered, and less overtly narrative, although in my opinion no less vocally inspired. The most directly American elements are Walker’s use of two different folksongs from Carl Sandburg’s anthology, *The American Songbag: O Bury Me Beneath the Willow* in the central Theme and Variations movement, and *Liza in the Summertime*, a secondary contrasting theme quoted in the final movement. I hear the harmonic colors of jazz throughout the sonata, and in certain passages in the last movement, a conga-like drumming that is not the kind of percussive treatment found in either Prokofiev or Bartók, but something more African-American in spirit, in its immediacy and syncopated energy.

Floyd is, of course, best known as a composer of musical theater. As I listened to your beautiful recording of his sonata, an operatic sensibility emerged, a give and take of musical phrases that suggest spoken dialogue. Am I hearing the music in the spirit as you play it?

Indeed, Floyd’s mastery of opera and large-scale dramatic narrative is legendary. I once heard my teacher, Ann Schein, declare that Chopin’s piano sonatas are like the operas he never wrote. Here, Floyd has infused this sonata with all the dramatic inspiration of his operatic voice. You can almost hear the opening section of the first movement as an overture. His innate melodic gift and his incredible use of orchestration, with its speech-like rhythms and colorful timbres that permeate his operas, fill the canvas of this sonata with the same declamatory richness. To quote a beautiful passage from André Golbert’s liner notes: “. . .the expansive second theme [first movement] enters with disarming intimacy, like a lone voice heard across a desolate landscape. The idea of human empathy, vital to Floyd’s operas, is here portrayed without words: this melody finds the company of a second voice in the following canon and is later embraced by the echoes of a richer texture.”

An interesting backstory: It was this theme that decided the hall in which I recorded the album. I knew I wanted an epic-sounding live space and a New York Steinway that resonated with great richness and granitic power. Playing this theme on such a Steinway in Florida State University’s Ruby Diamond Concert Hall convinced me it had to be there. I had not even at the time made the connection that it was the very same hall that witnessed the premiere of *Susannah*, the opera that launched Floyd’s composing career in 1955.

I understand that you had the opportunity to play the Floyd Sonata for the composer. What a privilege! What kind of feedback did he give you?

Playing for Carlisle Floyd is an experience I will forever treasure. He is a very gracious, noble person; he communicated with precision and enthusiasm as he worked through the score with me. In both outer movements, he wanted broader tempos than the tempo markings indicate, giving a truly heroic, epic quality to the declamatory writing. In the slow movement he also advised: “Forget the metronome marks and let the music dictate.” Regarding dynamic shadings, pacing of transitions, voicing, phrasing, articulation, and rhythmic inflection, he stressed faithfulness to the score, referencing his frequent comment to singers: “You sing this

beautifully, but I like it better the way I wrote it.” He admitted that this sonata is extremely difficult, one reason it is not more frequently played. He urged me to always keep going to hold the vast proportions of the structure together, yet to never become so fast that I lose the melodic intensity and intervallic clarity. The fugato section in the first movement he described as “bristling with tension.” In the spacious second theme areas and the transitions surrounding them, he wanted layering of sonorities in an “impressionistic murmurando”; and where themes were especially lyrical, he coached me much like he might coach a singer, having me deliver whole phrases by moving into the middles of each one.

I asked him what his imaginative vision was for the dark, scary central section of the second movement, to which he responded with a grin, “This is like ... a murder mystery.” The final chord of the slow movement he called “other-worldly” and insisted that the dissonance within it must cut like a knife. He said that dotted rhythms (which occur like a fingerprint in each of the three movements) must always be as taut as possible—reminding me of the opening of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata, op. 111—to give maximum rhythmic tension. In the final movement, he encouraged direct-ness of expression and a continually linear approach, despite the frequent non-legato articulation of the main thematic material. Of the mysterious middle section of this movement, a surreal mirroring of the opening *Deciso*, Floyd likened it to the “veils of Mata Hari.” He recounted how his teacher, Firkušný, gave the premiere performance of this sonata at Carnegie Hall. I asked (begged, rather!) if he had a recording of this performance, but he said he does not. How I would love to have heard Firkušný play the piece! Floyd unabashedly says that Firkušný was the inspiration behind it, much like Horowitz was to Barber’s Piano Sonata, op. 26.

What a terrific story! Impressionistic murmurando indeed! Speaking of the Barber Sonata, it is certainly the best-known music on this collection, and the most frequently recorded. Are you influenced by other recordings of the music, in particular, the famous Horowitz rendition?

Absolutely, there are glorious recordings of the Barber Sonata, and I’ve studied both the Horowitz and all of [John] Browning’s recordings of Barber’s music, since I feel it is so important to learn from the artists who worked so closely with him. The historical accounts of their collaborations are truly fascinating. Detailed in Barbara Heyman’s wonderful book on Barber, Horowitz declared, “Barber is one of the few American composers who knows how to write for the piano.... I like pianistic music....” Of Horowitz, Barber recounted: “... he had a great influence on me for writing for piano.... He used to play Scriabin for me all night in Mount Kisco.... My piano teacher, Vengerova, was a great teacher, but hearing Horowitz play was for me a great experience. I learned so much.”

I do love Horowitz’s recording very much indeed—in particular, the strong voicings, the use of the pedals for layering of sounds, the enormous range of color and dynamic, and the sense of sweeping line, which have surely inspired my own performances. At the same time, I have not made it my goal to be an echo of anyone else, but rather, to go to the music itself and to find its voice. I feel that the joining of this sonata with the others on this album documents a certain unity of artistic declamation, and I cannot imagine a more fitting conclusion to the program than this monumental work.

Obviously, there are other American piano sonatas that could have been chosen for this collection. I am thinking in particular of the wonderful sonatas of Elliott Carter and Aaron Copland. Is a volume two in the pipeline?

In fact, I had also prepared Ernest Bloch’s 1936 Piano Sonata for this album, but later realized there was too much music (a very nice problem to have)—so, with my producer, we decided on the four works that meshed best as a program and fit onto a single disc. So, Bloch could possibly be a point of departure for the next album! I am quite fascinated with the music of Leo Ornstein these days—there are piano sonatas, and ravishing works for cello and piano—that might pair well with Bloch’s music. As for Carter and Copland, these are sonatas I dearly love, both towering works. I believe their aesthetics, though, convey a somewhat different

dimension than the works on this album, which may be one reason they do not appear here. Carter and Copland were among Nadia Boulanger's most celebrated American disciples, and this influence surely comes through in their music. My teacher Ann Schein, who was very close to Elliott Carter, has made a stunning recording of this sonata, paired with the Copland Piano Variations and Sonata for Violin and Piano, with her husband, violinist Earl Carlyss, on the MSR Classics label. Incidentally, she performed Copland's Violin Sonata in New York at Alice Tully Hall in 1975, in a concert celebrating his 75th birthday. And speaking of birthdays: This season I performed in a concert celebrating Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's 80th, her piece entitled For Elliott, which she wrote in honor of Carter's 90th. The tributes continue—and certainly, those on this album are directly from the heart.

I actually own that recording by Ann Schein and reviewed it enthusiastically in these pages. But I would still look forward to hearing it played by you, as well as the Ornstein and Bloch!

I am very moved by this, especially coming from you! I will need to consider the possibilities seriously, then—and may the dialogue, and tributes, be continued!

BEYOND THE SOUND: Sonatas by Griffes, Walker, Floyd, and Barber • Heidi Louise Williams (pn) • ALBANY 1790 (78:31)

GRIFFES Piano Sonata. WALKER Piano Sonata No. 1. FLOYD Piano Sonata. BARBER Piano Sonata, op. 26

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