

Mostly music, random reflections, a dash of disc golf...
and in all things: Soli Deo gloria.

Art Songs Are Alive and Well



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Soprano Mary Mackenzie and pianist Heidi Louise Williams survey mostly 21st-century songs in a compelling 2-CD set

It has been some months now (back in 2018 in fact) since [Albany Records](#) released “Vocalisms,” a 2-CD set of songs by four leading and living composers: John Harbison, James Primosch, Daniel Crozier and Ned Rorem. While one regrets being able to review the discs in a timely fashion, the larger point is that the word needs to get out to any and all who are drawn to this intimate art form. Once it became clear that yours truly would not get to this quickly, the decision was made to hold it until now: Mary Mackenzie (pictured above, courtesy of her website gallery), can be heard tomorrow (May 10) in Madison with the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, in Shostakovich’s still stunning Symphony No. 14.

Several general aspects of the set deserve mention at the top: the selections are interspersed among the four composers in appealing sequences; longer than usual pauses between songs (and between changes to a different composer) allow the listener to really absorb the frequently intense (not to mention beautiful) music; and a wonderful booklet is included with full texts and much useful and stimulating information.

Disc One opens with the title track as it were, Harbison’s “Vocalism: A Grand Aria for Soprano and Piano.” The two texts come from Walt Whitman, and Harbison (and the performers) match Whitman’s characteristic shout-from-the-mountaintop ebullience. Primosch’s “Waltzing the Spheres” follows, and the 2011 setting of Susan Scott Thompson provides the first arresting moments from Williams.

The two composers alternate again, and in Primosch’s “Three Folk Hymns,” the second, the well-known Irish tune “Be Thou My Vision,” is by turns gentle and ecstatic.

Daniel Crozier’s music makes its first appearance next, and represent the earliest works on the discs: 1996. The pair of songs, “History’s Lamb” and “Byzantium,” from “Songs for the Walters,” are the kind of nuggets that reward repeated hearings and pondering – with less than four minutes of music in all!

The first disc closes with Crozier's "Four Poems of Emily Dickinson" (2014), which evolves into a comprehensive display of Mackenzie's range, color and phrasing.

The long-venerated song stylist Ned Rorem is represented at the start of Disc Two with the final six of the nineteen "Another Sleep: III (2000). The songs were written as a deeply personal and honest response to the death of Jim Holmes, who passed away in 1999, after living with Rorem for 32 years. Fourteen authors in all are set in the complete work; among the most compelling in the six performed here are the final two. In Paul Goodman's poem "Despairing to Be Happy Any More," Mackenzie leads us confidently through emotional thickets, while Williams's spare piano part is succinctly elegant. In the closing "The Waves" from Virginia Woolf, we get a steady build-up of the voice with a steady piano part; they rise to a gradual climax before subsiding and ending abruptly.

Crozier returns with four songs with the last of the group, "The Fire of Wild White Sun" leading to this scribbled note as I listened: "In the end, less is more, a characteristic shared by many of these composers; Mary Mackenzie has an interpretive agility that balances climactic expressions with a 'hear-between-the-lines' simplicity.

The discs close with Primosch's 1999 "Holy the Firm." The second of the five songs is "Every Day Is a God," where again we are captivated by the cascades of 'wave music' that Williams produces so masterfully. The final song is "Deathbeds," and while it might not be a summation type of work some listeners might long for, this longest song on the discs is a suitable conclusion to a recital that collectively so often focuses on earthly and eternal life, and woven between the two, the power of love.

Be of good cheer, then, if you're among those who have bemoaned the "death" of the art song. It might be harder to encounter works such as these in a concert hall setting, but composers are still producing gems – and artists such as Mary Mackenzie and Heidi Louise Williams are polishing them to achieve maximum glow.

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