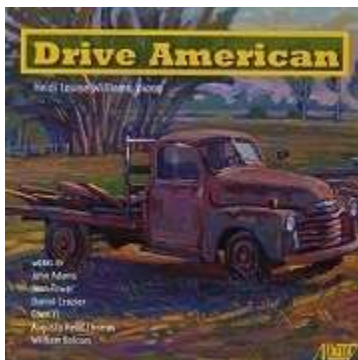


ARKIVMUSIC

FEATURE REVIEW by Greg La Traile



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Composer: John Adams, Joan Tower, Daniel Crozier, Chen Yi, ...

Performer: Heidi Louise Williams

Number of Discs: 1

Recorded in: Stereo

Drive American, a recital of American keyboard music, spans nearly 25 years of American piano music. These works are played with insight and understanding by pianist Heidi Louise Williams.

Among the highlights are American Berserk by John Adams, (the composer tells us the title comes from a phrase used by novelist Philip Roth.) The piece sounds like an exuberant cousin of Stravinsky's Piano Rag Music, and Ragtime of 1918, that is to say, a Cubist jazzy piece that rushes and jumps all over the page in what Adams described as "bipolar shifts of mood and tempo." It is great fun on the ears and Ms. Williams plays it with an appealing forward momentum.

Joan Tower's No Longer Very Clear is a collection of four pieces written at different times. This is music that impresses on repeated hearings. The pieces at first have cryptic titles but the music, subtle on melody but high on motion and rhythm, becomes more rewarding as you listen. The first piece, Holding a Daisy, is inspired by a Georgia O'Keefe painting, and opens musically in a colorful way but without melodic sentiment. The second, titled Or like a...an Engine, is dedicated to pianist Ursula Oppens for the 50th anniversary of radio station WNYC-FM. Here the music picks up speed with motorized rhythms. Vast Antique Cubes attempts to create a vast space and gradual ascent as a structural element giving the pianist a chance to play in legato and the longest piece, Throbbing Still, is more elaborate, and perhaps more personal in its meaning. Here Joan Tower, without obvious allusions to other composers recalls the influences she grew up with in South America including Inca rhythms and the works of Stravinsky.

At a little over 11 minutes, Winter Aubade by Daniel Crozier is the longest single piece on the album and the toughest nut to crack, though it is not a particularly loud or forceful piece and it is graced with a poetic atmosphere that draws you in. The piece was written specifically for Heidi Louise Williams. This morning song explores what the composer has termed "fairy-tale" music of a "fantastic" sort. Telling a story through well-delineated themes that are heard at the start and moving through many transformations. There is no specific story or program but the overall mood is poetic and introspective. It is quite gratifying that new American music such as this is being written, well performed and recorded.

Ba Ban by Chen Yi, based on a Chinese folk melody also brought to mind Stravinsky, particularly the mechanical bird music from Song of the Nightingale as well as the splashier portions of Firebird and some of Ravel as well. But that is only a superficial coloristic impression. Subtle motives emerge and repeated brief gestures eventually give this piece an appealing charm.

Two other composers on this disc are Augusta Read Thomas, whose five movement suite titled Traces (composed in 2007) is most enjoyable and William Bolcom, with three selections from 12 New Etudes, Book IV. The Thomas pieces are quite clever, such as Reverie, subtitled Like Robert Schumann (The Poet Speaks)

crossed with George Crumb. That is exactly what you get. A tiny, gentle, quite, minimalist and fragmented essence of Schumann's poetic piece. The second piece, Caprice – Like Scarlatti's Baroque Ornamentation crossed with Art Tatum, attempts to combine these elements. The other titles are Tango – Like Astor Piazzolla crossed with John Coltrane, Impromptu – Like Stravinsky crossed with Chopin and Thelonious Mink and Toccata – Like J.S. Bach crossed with BeBop. This music is not however witty or light, nor does it cleverly shift from one obvious stylistic allusion to another. Instead, it is written and played throughout with a seriously straight face.

Bolcom's three Etudes were written in memory of the great Paul Jacobs and I can't help feeling on listening that Williams plays them with the same sensitivity and beauty that Jacobs would have brought to them. This album is highly recommended to anyone who loves to explore and discover important new music for the piano.

- Greg La Traille, ArkivMusic.com

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