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FEATURE REVIEW by Michael Cameron



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

Performer: Heidi Louise Williams

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Recorded in: Stereo

ADAMS American Berserk. TOWER No Longer Very Clear. CROZIER Winter Aubade. YI Ba Ban. READ THOMAS Traces. BOLCOM 12 New Etudes: 3 selections

Rarely have I come across a disc that checks virtually all of the boxes listing attributes I crave in recordings. Most importantly, Heidi Louise Williams's choices of piano works is spot-on, not only in terms of quality (each of the pieces ranges from excellent to near-masterpiece), but in the commonalities that are threaded throughout the survey and lend an intriguing unity.

I'm tempted to say that this is a disc that even those who express revulsion of contemporary music will find compelling. This is true enough, but the statement implies a compositional approach diluted with endless "neos" that thumb their collective noses at developments of the last century. This disc has the potential to convince any doubters that a program of top-drawer American music can hold its own with the endless regurgitations of the canon that dominate the concert stage.

The title *Drive American* has multiple meanings, most of which are apparent in John Adams's ferociously driving and inventive *American Berserk*, composed in 2001 for Garrick Ohlsson. Rhythms are propulsive yet fractured, and the ear is invited to grasp at a groove that rarely reveals itself in clear meters. It is profoundly engaging and unsettling simultaneously. Joan Tower's *No Longer Very Clear* is inspired by a John Ashbery poem, and each of the four movements is dedicated to a different pianist. All are terrific pieces, but my favorite is *Like a ... an Engine*, which, much like the Adams, conjures the image of a car speeding down a bumpy road, perilously lurching from side to side. It is fiendishly difficult, but Williams takes charge of the wheel with remarkable courage and control.

Daniel Crozier's *Winter Aubade* also resonates with mystery, but the lyrical potential of the piano is the more dominant posture. The harmonies resonate with a warm glow that seems particularly French in inspiration. Chen Yi is native-born Chinese, and has lived in the States for many years. The overt influences here are from her homeland, but since Asian flavors are but a few of the multiple ingredients in our cultural melting pot, the inclusion here is apt. Once again we have a work that is often bracing in its forward push, most notably in final bars that throb with pounding intensity.

The five movements of Augusta Read Thomas's splendid *Traces* crossbreeds the styles of past composers with aspects of 20th-century music, most often in the jazz idiom. "Caprices" combines Scarlatti with Art Tatum, an unlikely duo if ever there was one. In Thomas's hands the heady brew bubbles and sizzles in every bar, and Williams manages to make the craggy rhetoric sound fresh and spontaneous. Three of William Bolcom's *12 New Etudes*, by turns meditative and convulsive, keep the streak going and finish the disc in rousing fashion.

All of this is terrific music, played with conviction and cleanly recorded. Forget the caveats and categorizations. Everyone music lover should own this, period. Michael Cameron

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