

BEYOND THE SOUND • Heidi Louise Williams (pn) • ALBANY 1790 (78:31)
GRIFFES Piano Sonata **G. WALKER** Piano Sonata No. 1
FLOYD Piano Sonata **BARBER** Piano Sonata

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Brilliant programming meets performances of fire meets excellent recording meets superb documentation: this is a significant release from all angles. Pianist Heidi Louise Williams partnered soprano Mary Mackenzie in a twofer of American art song that included offerings by Harbison, Primosch and Crozier (see my interview and review in *Fanfare* 42:3); it is wonderful to see that her solo exploits are no less successful.

Annotator André Golbert writes beautifully and accurately, explaining well for example the multi-faceted music of Charles Tomlinson Griffes. One can hear in Williams' fine performance the influences of the Impressionists (the one most often cited influence in relation to this composer) but also that of Skryabin and even the Austro-Germanic, Wagnerian world of Griffes' training. Moments close to the rumblings of Debussy's submerged cathedral rub shoulders with high exoticism; a darker tread colors the picture. Williams, a fine pianist, honors the headiness of the music as much as she does the music's forward trajectory towards its granitic final chords. While Hamelin might constitute fearsome opposition on an all-Griffes Hyperion disc, Williams has a persuasiveness all of her own.

The music of George Walker has fascinated me before in these pages: the Sinfonia Varsovia under Ian Hobson recorded a fabulous disc for Albany (see my review in *Fanfare* 32:5) and, interestingly, there is a recording of this 1953 sonata by the composer himself on Albany (reviewed *Fanfare* 19:4). Walker's Piano Sonata No. 1 is multi-faceted, moving from dissonance to jazz to folk easily and confidently. Walker uses the tune of the folk song *O bury me beneath the willow* as the basis of the central theme and variations. Here, Williams captures all of the Americana-based nostalgia of the theme; Walker then takes it for quite a walk (some might say a good hike). The variations create their own mini-world, and Williams traces their lines perfectly, her awareness of layering and voicing exemplary. The fiery finale has pretty much the excitement of a live performance; there is the distinct feeling of living on the edge, yet providing total accuracy.

The discography for Carlisle Floyd shows two recordings of his Piano Sonata and the rest is opera, the genre he was most associated with; Scott Watkins' disc coupled it with two more American piano sonatas and therefore neatly leads the listener towards Hanson's op. 11 Sonata and William Schirmer's Piano Sonata No. 17, while Daniell Revenaugh's performance is available on an arkiv DVD.

Dedicated to his piano teacher, the great Czech pianist Rudolf Firkušný, Floyd's sonata is a magnificent work, particularly impressive in its more intimate moments. This particular performance has an interesting link to the composer, as it was recorded at Ruby Diamond Concert Hall at Florida State University, the self-same stage which also launched Floyd's composing career with his opera *Susannah*. It is difficult to imagine a more convincing performance than Williams', as she understands Floyd's harmonic language so completely. It is easy to imagine the central slow movement meandering aimlessly in lesser hands, but Williams' performance is absolutely exemplary in honoring Floyd's statement. The passage that leads to the movement's end which must be marked at least pianissimo from the dynamic we hear here is the very definition of suspenseful, the low left-hand tread forming the dark basis for right-hand chords that, finally, resolve. The bracing, granitic finale initially offers no respite (the brief first section is marked "Deciso") but there are brief

plateaux that peep through that remind us of Floyd's inner humanity. A remarkable piece; and I for one am aching to hear Floyd's operas now.

Back to more familiar territory for the Barber Sonata, where competition blossoms out exponentially. In the context of this program, though, as one experiences the recital one really does feel it is the only way to conclude. Williams might not dislodge Browning as my preferred executant in this piece (the MSR second volume) or Cliburn, but she comes mightily close, particularly in her way with the scherzo, which has more than a touch of the post-Lisztian diabolical about it (and in doing so maps beautifully with the angular, almost Busonian, opening to the finale).

The fine recording supports all of this, the focused bass in particular impressive. A superb disc that (re-)introduces American piano sonatas eminently worthy of our attention.

Colin Clarke

Five stars: A superb disc that (re-)introduces American piano sonatas eminently worthy of our attention