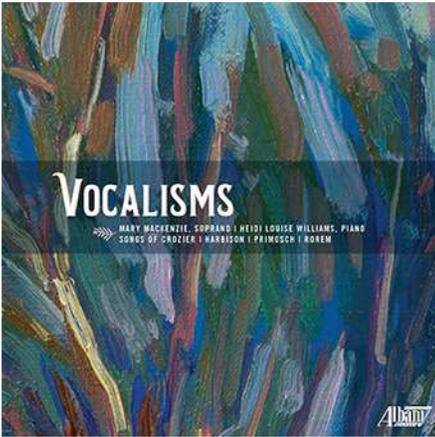


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FEATURE REVIEW by Huntley Dent



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HARBISON *Vocalism: A Grand Aria for Soprano & Piano. Seven Poems of Lorine Niedecker.* **PRIMOSCH** *Waltzing the Spheres. Three Folk Hymns. Shadow Memory. Holy the Firm.* **CROZIER** *Songs for the Walters* (excerpts). *Four Poems of Emily Dickinson. The Rainbow Comes and Goes. And, Daylight... . After-Song. The Fire of a Wild White Sun.* **ROREM** *Another Sleep: III*

This engrossing collection of American songs, most written after 2000, is not only enjoyable in itself but allows the listener to reflect on the state of the art. Some things don't change. Charles Ives's songs express his absorption in metaphysics, hymns, folk songs, and Modernist musical invention. The same elements are found here in various guises. James Primosch's *Three Folk Hymns* could be an Ives title, and the same composer's song cycle *Holy the Firm* contemplates the mystery of death as personally as Emily Dickinson did. She is represented here by Daniel Crozier's *Four Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

If there is a common thread running through these 15 diverse art songs, it is spiritual and metaphysical, expanding the definition to include the ecstasy of immediate experience, the transient radiance of sunlight, and the inexorable passing of time. The performers, lyric soprano Mary Mackenzie and pianist Heidi Louise Williams, have selected material that leans in this direction, and it feels like contemporary America in our second Gilded Age for composers to turn away from crass materialism to peer into the light of the inner world—Ives would have agreed, I think.

The trick is to make the intimate and other-worldly feel like something personal and beautiful, which singer and pianist quite successfully do. Mackenzie is one of those rare singers who focuses strongly on contemporary music—she has a close association with many composers and previously recorded works by John Harbison and Primosch for Albany. I have great admiration for singers who can meet the demands of contemporary vocal music: clear diction, spot-on intonation across wide leaps, flexibility when the vocal line presents *melisma*, an ability to communicate the feelings behind atonal and exotic melodies (or non-melodies), and an expanded imagination that adapts itself to each composer's unique voice. Mackenzie displays all of these

qualities, and her partnership with Williams, who surmounts all the challenges presented by contemporary piano music with real bravura, is seamless.

Fanfare readers will already know the names of Harbison and Ned Rorem, and it can be fairly said that Rorem's lifelong dedication to song has been picked up by Harbison. The album takes its title from *Vocalism*, a "grand aria" Harbison composed in 2006. It's an ambitious setting of a Walt Whitman poem (continuing another tradition in American songs) where "vocalism" stands for the power of words to lead and beguile us, while the poet longs to feel what lies too deep for words. Harbison's idiom is tonal in the steady rhythmic accompaniment, which breaks out in elaboration but ends in calmness. The vocal line is in what I call "free tonality." As different as other songs on the program are, they often approximate this pattern.

Rorem has always preferred a spare elegance to Ivesian density, and that still holds true in the six songs that constitute *Another Sleep: III* from 2000. Celebrated as Rorem is, I'm afraid he's also an example of a bitter American lesson: no composer is too major to ignore. He has said that he feels neglected now, so it's good to be drawn into his intimate feelings here, where sleep connotes death and loss. Rorem describes the 19 songs of *Another Sleep* as a memorial to his life partner, who died in 1999 after more than thirty years together. Mackenzie and Williams beautifully capture the poignancy of a song like "Night," based on a text by Sappho as mysterious as a *haiku*. But Rorem's ultimate stance is defiance in the face of death, and the performers deftly shift gears when a song is passionately agitated.

The other two composers, Primosch and Crozier, are new to me, and they speak well for themselves in the program notes. Born in Cleveland in 1956, Primosch heads the electronic music center at the University of Pennsylvania. The ten songs represented here (none electronica) express a wide-ranging musical mind as comfortable with setting traditional hymn tunes as Annie Dillard's contemplations of death. Daniel Crozier, also represented by ten songs, has a doctorate from Peabody Conservatory and teaches at Rollins College in Florida, having worked with Harbison, among others.

I'm not lumping them together, but like Primosch, there's a wide-ranging musical talent, and taste, in Crozier's songs, and both are exquisitely sensitive to the ephemeral nuances of poetry. One finds lovely traditional melody in Crozier's "The Rainbow Comes and Goes" and in Primosch's "...That Passeth All Understanding," each styled perfectly by Mackenzie. In the latter songs Williams beautifully weaves a tracery of Debussyan delicacy, growing in intensity and difficulty, that is a separate but compatible music.

I can't do justice to the variety of these songs and their many musics, except to say that Crozier and Primosch are beyond any "ism," encompassing a landscape where every style is open to exploration. It seems as if American art song will remain very private, but no less rich, and that the audience will be small and select. But every once in a while we get an inspiring collection like this one. Very good sound, although I wish Mackenzie had been miked closer for the sake of diction. Full texts and useful notes.

Huntley Dent

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