

FANFARE MAGAZINE

FEATURE REVIEW by Peter Burwasser



Release Date: 10/11/2011

Label: Albany Records Catalog #: 1298

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

Performer: Heidi Louise Williams

Number of Discs: 1

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

Here's something you don't get every day: an album of contemporary music that is fun. OK, that's a bit facetious, but the music here is certainly more rollicking than is usual. Things start off with John Adams's delightfully manic American Berserk, a contemporary toccata, I would say. The composer himself calls it bipolar music. The energy is bursting at the seams in this tour de force, but Joan Tower's music is barely less vivacious, although the character of the material is darker, lacking the echoes of whimsy that Adams dials in. Her music comes across as having more dramatic gravity, delivered with her characteristically gutsy and colorful voice. The two works strike a compelling contrast.

Winter Aubade, from the pen of Daniel Crozier, is the restful interlude at the center of this program, a kind of slow movement in this driving American clutch of music. It is a very beautiful work, constructed of lush, even exotic harmonies that recall Debussy. Just when I began to sense that the music was going on too long (it runs just shy of 12 minutes in this performance), my imagination was re-engaged by the dreamy serenity of the writing. I have not heard Crozier's music before this, but welcome the opportunity to hear more.

Ba Ban brings our ears brusquely back to high energy, with a brilliant opening motif that seems to sound out the name of the piece. Chinese born Chen Yi, now a professor at the Conservatory of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, employs many traditional Asian techniques and folk idioms in this work, including whole-note harmonic progressions, but the effect is very fresh, bristling with modern energy.

Augusta Read Thomas has written a clever pastiche of cross-influences, five short pieces that ponder such encounters as "like Stravinsky crossed with Chopin and Thelonious Monk." Of course, her own influence is equally important, essential in a basic sense, as she brings a refined humor and wise insight to the work of musicians she obviously loves. The whole thing kind of sounds like music heard in a dream, and then quickly jotted down in the composer's earliest waking moments.

William Bolcom's 12 New Etudes, from 1988, may well become a contemporary staple. This is remarkable music, superbly constructed and accessible without being in any way pandering, a model of successful contemporary writing. The last piece on the program, Hymne à l'amour, is without doubt a masterpiece, a deeply moving tribute to the work's dedicatee, Paul Jacobs. The music has a profundity, and a pulsating expressiveness, that is simply hypnotic.

Everything here is delivered with bold yet thoughtful playing by Heidi Louise Williams, a superb young American pianist and Peabody Conservatory grad. This is a terrific presentation of music by living composers, an unabashed pleasure to listen to, but also provocative and stimulating.

- Peter Burwasser, Fanfare Magazine

This article originally appeared in Issue 35:4 (Mar/Apr 2012) of *Fanfare Magazine*.