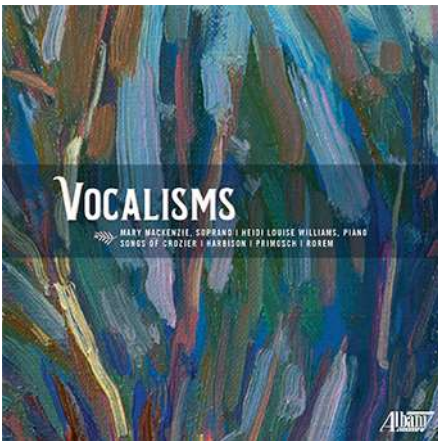


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FEATURE REVIEW by Colin Clarke



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Composers: Crozier, Harbison, Primosch, Rorem

Performers: Heidi Louise Williams, Mary Mackenzie

Number of Discs: 2

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VOCALISMS • Mary Mackenzie (sop); Heidi Louise Williams (pn) • ALBANY 1743/44 (two discs: 104:44)
HARBISON *Vocalism. Seven Poems of Lorine Niedecker* **PRIMOSCH** *Waltzing the Spheres. Three Folk Hymns. Shadow Memory. Holy the Firm* **CROZIER** *Songs for the Walters: History's Lamb; Byzantium. Four Poems of Emily Dickinson. The Rainbow Comes and Goes. And, Daylight After-Song ("Through Love to Light"). The Fire of a Wild White Sun* **ROREM** *Another Sleep III*: Nos. 14-19

The passion of enthusiasm for this repertoire of both soprano Mary Mackenzie and pianist Heidi Louise Williams shines through this twofer. Their extensive knowledge of this repertoire shines through the interview above, just as it informs their performances.

The piece *Vocalism* by John Harbison sets Whitman; the title page proclaims it as a “grand aria” and it does indeed have a feeling of huge confidence, even swagger, about it. Composed for *SongFest*, the emotional range of *Vocalism* is huge, as is the palette both soprano and pianist bring to the performance. Mackenzie’s lively tone seems to fit the story-telling perfectly.

A intimate warmth suffuses James Primosch’s *Waltzing the Spheres* in his setting of Susan Scott Thompson, the golden harmonies leaving a memorable impression; Heidi Louise Williams finds just the right sound, her final gesture almost questioning. The disc leaves a goodly amount of silence after the song, and rightly so, allowing that question to resonate on. Harbison’s *Seven Poems of Lorine Niedecker* contrasts with the Primosch superbly. The piano writing and the vocal phrases are decidedly elusive before a move back to the hearth for Primosch’s deliciously American *Three Folk Hymns*. Here, Mackenzie unfolds her poignant message against the brilliant simplicity of Williams’ soundscape (along with that wondrous piano filigree in the second hymn discussed above). Nowhere, though, is Primosch’s musical imagination so pronounced than in his setting of Susan Orlean, *Shadow Memory*.

Daniel Crozier’s opera *With Blood, With Ink* has been memorably recorded on Albany by Fort Worth Opera. Crozier writes his tale around the Mexican nun Juana Inés de la Cruz with a true feeling for the voice and the vocal line. Here, we get to experience his work in microcosm with the songs “History’s Lamb” (a tender song in half-light) and the far more extrovert “Byzantium” with its sprightly piano counterpoint (and one can indeed hear the cheeky joy that Williams brings to the piano part and to which she refers to above; it is easily possible to imagine a smile on Mackenzie’s face as she sings, too). The poet Emily Dickinson has inspired so many composers; Crozier’s *Four Poems of Emily Dickinson* is a fascinating set that draws one in over repeated listenings. It reveals its secrets slowly, and the performers here project that aspect with great understanding, presenting it as mysterious to the core; and yet, in harmonic terms, often remarkably fragrant. Mackenzie is particularly impressive in the vocal asks of “Angels in the Early morning,” the second song, her acrobatics against the fleeting staccato passages of Williams.

Death and the afterlife stalk the second disc. Ned Rorem's *Another Sleep* was written in response to the death of his partner, Jim Holmes, and is an incredible musical tribute, some movements aflame with anger, some positively bereft. Setting poets as diverse as Sappho, Virginia Wolff and Jorge Luis Borges, it is Rorem's utter command of his materials that sustains the piece; Mackenzie and Williams sustain the tension powerfully. The sad dance of "Death Stands Above Me" is dispelled by the fragmented gestures of "Despairing to be Happy Any More," but it is the final song, "The Waves," to a poem by Virginia Wolff, and performed as if the music is suspended in the air on a cloud of grief with a tolling bell low in the piano bass, that is impossible to forget. The cruel tracteries of the grieving process are laid bare here; this is not easy listening, nor is it intended to be.

Choosing Wordsworth as his muse, Crozier sets *The Rainbow Comes and Goes* with a Schubertian simplicity and glow; but it is possibly the final offering of the group, *The Fire of a Wild White Sun*, that is the finest. Williams' sound painting against Mackenzie's rapt delivery of the text makes for a powerful combination.

Finally, Primosch's *Holy the Firm*, described by Mary Mackenzie above as "simultaneously the most satisfying and most intimidating cycle I have ever sung." A multi-poet cycle centering on praise and mystery, Primosch's writing is brilliantly inventive. The lyricism of "Every Day is a God" is magnificent, while the mystery aspect of the cycle seems foregrounded in the tissue-thin textures of "The Ladder of Divine Ascent." The final song, "Deathbeds," offers huge challenges in terms of breath control and purity of interval for the singer, both aspects triumphantly conquered here.

Presentation and recording of this offering are impeccable, while the accompanying notes are as generous as the spirit of the performances. This twofer is a heart-warming testament to modern American art song.

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