

**SCHUMANN/LISZT** *Widmung* **SHATIN** *To Keep the Dark Away. Fantasy on St. Cecilia* **PROKOFIEV** *Pieces from "Romeo and Juliet,"* op. 75: The Street awakens; Arrival of the Guests; The Young Juliet; The Montagues and the Capulets; Mercutio **WAGNER/LISZT** *Ballade of the Flying Dutchman. Isoldes Liebestod*

The above interview expresses so much about the works on this disc and how they interact: of the vital importance of love, in its many guises, from interpersonal (the Schumanns), to a love of God, to Love-Death in Wagner. To bring Saint Cecilia and Emily Dickinson together speaks volumes about the sweep of this album. Thought-provoking and deep, this is surely how all multi-composer discs should be, with the chosen composers illuminating each other within the confines of an overarching concept. From that aspect alone, this disc is special.

That is before, of course, taking into consideration the superb performances by Gayle Martin; her intimate way with *Widmung* is the springboard from which it all begins. One of the greatest of all song transcriptions (in the present writer's humble estimation, anyway), Martin gives a performance of great *Schwung*.

The slowly oscillating, hypnotic left-hand of the first of Shatin's *To Keep the Dark Away* (2011) against a highly disjunct right-hand melody could hardly be more contrastive. The five movements, all inspired by Emily Dickinson, are like different elements of a multifaceted jewel. The second, "A glee possesseth me," speaks of the movements of a silly show-off, while "An actual suffering strengthens" seems to zoom in on the dark vortex of energy that suffering can so cruelly manifest as (see the interview for more on this movement). The beautifully named "An Auroral Light" spins lines like the finest of threads via careful and strategic use of the sustaining pedal (and Martin's soft touch); the set ends with the phantasmagoric play of "Whose Spokes a Dizzy Music Makes," tellingly rendered by Martin.

The touch Martin uses for the opening of the Prokofiev ("The Street Awakens") could hardly be more different: chiseled and exact. We enter straight away into specifically Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, where sustaining pedal is very much a seasoning to the main dish. Martin's readings of the five movements are beautifully characterized, nowhere more so than in the tender yet still often spiky "The Young Juliet." The cloud of sound towards the end of this movement is perfectly Prokofiev, and evaporates beautifully before the jackboots of "The Montagues and the Capulets" appear. But the central panel of this movement is heard here in a magnificently tender rendering.

A transcription "fashioned" from the piano concerto *The Passion of St Cecilia* (1985), the solo piano *Fantasy on St Cecilia* of 1996 is divided into three sections: "Her Struggle," "Her Passion" and "Her Martyrdom." The first is rugged and superbly performed by Martin, who relishes each and every challenge. More, Martin's sense of tone and sound color is simply wonderful. The starry pointillism that launches "Her Passion" soon rises to heart-based outbursts, while the shortest movement, "Her Martyrdom," finds extremes of subterranean depth against celestial delicacy. From the canyon to the stars, as Messiaen might have put it, only here the move is from the corporeal to the heavenly realms, and the piece ends with a crushing, dark blow. Astonishing writing, and played with the most steadfast assurance and belief.

The low octave gestures of the *Dutchman* transcription nestle perfectly next to this (as does, one might posit, the post-mortem status of the Dutchman). Martin's performance is noteworthy for her definition. The fury of the storms remains, but one can

clearly hear the layerings, and the careful balance of the chords. While Shatin referenced Bach in the *Fantasy on St Cecilia*, here in Wagner/Liszt one can perhaps here a chorale-like slant to some of the writing

The opening of the Wagner/Liszt *Liebestod* is unabashed, encompassing in the briefest spell the entire drama that leads to those heady final moments of the music-drama. Transcendent love seems an apt way to close this sequence, and Martin manages to capture its essence.

This is an infinitely rewarding disc that demands repeated listening to get the most out of it. –Colin Clarke