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GIMBEL

THOMSON: Songs, all

Sarah Pelletier, Lynne McMurtry, William Hite, Aaron Engebret; Alison d'Amato, Linda Osborn, p; John McDonald, perc

New World 80775 [3CD] 198 minutes

The Florestan Recital Project is an organization "devoted to the art of the song recital in Boston". Headed by Aaron Engebret and Alison d'Amato, their work of championing and promoting the genre of the art song seems to place particular emphasis on music of the 20th Century. This release presents the most complete recorded collection of works for voice and piano by Virgil Thomson (1896-1989), one of America's most important composers.

Some of the songs are unpublished and previously unrecorded. Florestan's goal is to offer "a more complete understanding of his work". Thomson remarked that his aim in writing songs was to make the music "not only of equal quality with the verse but also its mate. It gets inside a poem and stays there, intertwined unforgettably, never to be thought of henceforth as not a part of the whole idea."

In an online video, Engebret describes Thomson's songs as a "cacophony of experience". It's a very kaleidoscopic assortment of musical styles and texts. As Engebret points out, "You hear his upbringing. You absolutely hear his being brought up as a Baptist. You hear church music. You hear Americana band music. You hear marching music. And then you hear French minimalism and you hear homages to Satie, Honegger, and Milhaud and other composers that he was close with in Paris. And then in his later years you hear a New York sound."

You can hear the weird, the wild, and the wonderful in these songs. Listening to this entire collection can be an endurance test. I found it helpful to listen sparingly at first. Everything here is interesting, but much of it gave me little pleasure. Thomson did not have what one could call a great gift for melody. After a second time through not many melodies linger happily in my memory. Significant exceptions are his *Shakespeare Songs*—especially 'Take, O Take Those Lips Away', which sounds like a Stephen Foster Song, and 'My Shepherd will Supply My Need,' probably his best-known piece. Some of the songs that will endure best are *Five Songs from William Blake*; *Tres Estampes de Ninez*; *Le Belle en Dormant*; *Shakespeare Songs*; and *Mostly About Love*.

His selection of texts is amazingly eclectic and often eccentric. The longest song at

12:17—really an extended recitative—is a 17th Century eulogy: *Funeral Oration for Henriette-Marie de France, Queen of Grande-Bretagne*. Four very strange "lullabies" with short texts by the composer sound like the pleadings of stumped parents trying to get a child to sleep. *Two by Marianne Moore* show Thomson's desire to wed text and music. His whimsical side comes out nicely in 'The Courtship of Yongly-Bongly-Bo' adapted from Edward Lear.

Thomson's friendships with Gertrude Stein and Kenneth Koch gave rise to some very odd songs. The Stein songs are quirky. (Thomson himself noted whimsically about Koch, "He writes just like Gertrude except it makes sense. His poetry wants music.") The collection ends with two sets of Koch songs, *Mostly About Love* and *Collected Poems*.

The repeated accompaniment patterns of these songs—often triple meter um-pa-pa or up-and-down-the-keyboard scales or arpeggiated patterns—get tiresome. Some of the songs are unaccompanied, and sometimes the accompaniment is almost non-existent. In *Five Phases* (1926) the accompaniment is supplied by drum or wood block or gong. A *Mass for Solo Voice* is spare and pointillistic in style.

Still, there is great variety to these songs, and these very fine performances make about as good a case for them as imaginable. I took particular delight in hearing William Hite, a Boston area singer I've appreciated for many years, who also gets many of the best songs. The other singers are just as good.

Texts and translations are included, but they are laid out in a way that often makes it hard to follow.

R MOORE

TOGNI: Hymns of Heaven & Earth;

Solstice Nights; 3 Neruda Odes

Ilana Waniuk, Suhashini Arulanandam, v; Rory McLeod, va; Dobrochna Zubek, vc; Cary Ebli, Eng hn; Stacie Dunlop, s

Centrediscs 22416—57 minutes

A composer as eclectic as Peter-Anthony Togni is bound to write very eclectic music. He studied organ and improvisation with no less a figure than Jean Langlais, and composition with Alain Gaussin; in addition, he is a sought-after soloist, broadcaster, and composer. Judging from the program of his compositions here, I'd say that he favors triadic harmonies, scale-based melodies, and substantial content over cheap or garish effect.

Most effective is his string quartet, *Hymns of Heaven and Earth*, and in particular the ecstatic II and IV (hymns to Mary and to Light). A two-movement *Solstice Nights* adds English horn to the quartet—I've never heard a