



CD Review by [David DeBoor Canfield](#)



Past Made Present: Music of Jessica Krash

Audio CD

Albany Records

As in my previous review of music by Jessica Krash in 37:4, I shall somehow force myself to avoid any crass puns utilizing her name, and I trust readers will forgive me for that. A few words of biographical information may also be found in that earlier review. I liked her music on that disc very much, and I like this one, too, as it provides an hour and a quarter's further evidence of her talent as a composer. Whereas, the earlier one focused on her solo and chamber instrumental works, the present CD gives priority to vocal works, both for chorus and solo singer. As before, Krash plays the piano parts in the pieces that call for the instrument.

The chorus opens this recital with *Young Vilna*, the name of a group of Jewish writers and artists working in Vilna (now Vilnius—in Lithuania) in the 1930s. The piece reflects the composer's ideas about young people wrestling with how to be good people in light of their forebear's struggles, and she herself has had to wrestle with her own grandfather's history. The music is not especially turgid, despite what it portrays. This "wrestling" strikes my ears as more of a questioning sort of mental state, rather than an agonized one. Indeed, it has moments of tender lyricism which are interposed between more rhythmic sections. The use of the clarinet adds a doleful aspect to the work, even though it is not given many klezmer gestures. The texts are drawn from questions that Vilnius teenagers posed in 2013 to author Ellen Cassedy about the horror of the Holocaust that had decimated their grandparents. The questions are often heart-wrenching: "Did anything good come out of the Holocaust?" "What is the best way to fight racism?" "What should we say to people who say it's time to close the book on this history and move on?" Krash's setting of these questions neither trivializes them, or attempts to make them philosophical treatises. Her music is direct and appealing, although occasionally full of pathos, and I was moved by it.

*Sulpicia's Songs* are translations by Mary Maxwell of texts by the Roman poet Sulpicia, who lived during the reign of Caesar Augustus, some decades before the advent of Christ. The texts are described in the booklet as "brave and heartfelt poems [that] have something in common with a Facebook over-sharer." I wouldn't know about the latter comparison, since I am not on any social media, but they do seem to have some relevance to our own era, having originally been written for Rome's cultural elite. The cycle opens with some tonally obscure sonorities in the piano in Krash's distinctive style, but the tonality becomes a little more settled once the voice enters. Nevertheless, these are not easy songs for the soprano, given their unusual melodic lines that sometimes jump around in odd intervals such as the tritone. Singer Emily Noël negotiates the challenges with seeming ease, and is possessed of a pleasant and well-placed voice that is a joy to listen to. She also brings across the texts very well: Just listen to her declamation of the line "...as your compulsion takes no account of my opinion," where the music also assumes a petulant character. In short, Krash in this cycle skillfully interweaves tender lyricism with occasional dramatic outbursts in keeping with the nature of the text she's setting.

The cleverly titled *Turns of Phrase* is one of two instrumental works in this recital, this one scored for flute and piano. The work was commissioned by J. T. Martin, a flute playing composer, and Krash drew her inspiration for the work from the Japanese shakuhachi, a wooden flute. *Turns* opens gently with the flute in its lower register spinning out a subtle line, over which piano filigree is sprinkled about like powdered sugar on a donut. Eventually, the flute works itself up into its highest register, while the piano joins it in this nosebleed region. Throughout the piece, Krash keeps her listeners guessing, as to what she'll do next in this 12-minute work that is rippling with delights. These include flutter-tonguing in the flute part, which is superbly rendered by flautist Laura Kaufman.

*The Cantigas de Amigo of Martin Codax* forms an interesting experiment on the part of Krash: At the first rehearsal of *Sulpicia's Songs*, soprano Emily Noël said the songs reminded her of Martin Codax's *Cantigas de Amigo*, suggesting that she write a modern accompaniment for them for piano. Krash of course recognized the potential collision of two eras separated by centuries (Codax is thought to have lived in the 13th century), but her contemporary style accompaniments beautifully enhance the otherworldly music by this distant composer. The cycle launches with repeated notes in the piano damped by one hand of the pianist, adding to the exotic flavor of the work. The style of Codax exclusively employs the archaic strophic form aaB (a rhymed distich followed by a refrain), and many of the poems revolve around the city of Vigo on the northwest coast of Spain (one of the most beautiful areas of the world I've ever visited, incidentally), apparently the habitation of the medieval composer. There seems to be a sad spirit to this music, or perhaps it's just wistful nostalgia, and they are as beautifully executed as they are conceived. The recital closes with *Delphi—What the Oracle Said*, a work for solo cello, written for Tanya Anisimova, who performs it here. Krash in this piece looks back fondly to a trip to Greece and the Oracle at Delphi that she had taken when she was in her teens. Through glissandos, harmonics, and a general subdued atmosphere, Krash successfully evokes the spirit of ancient Greece.

George Santayana famously said that those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat it. With the present disc entitled *Past Made Present*, Jessica Krash proves that those who *do* know the past can be fresh and innovative. She has important things to say in her music, and I hope many readers will be willing to listen to her and discover things in both the past and present that will enrich their lives. **David DeBoor Canfield**

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