

From Joseph Newsome's Facebook post:

Jessica Krash's Albany Records disc PAST MADE PRESENT is one of the finest recordings I have had the pleasure of reviewing.

THE REVIEW:

*Voix des Arts*

April 2018 RECORDING OF THE MONTH: Jessica Krash — PAST MADE PRESENT (Albany Records, TROY1716)



JESSICA KRASH: Past Made Present: Music of Jessica Krash—Emily Noël, soprano; Ian Swensen, violin; Robert DiLutis, clarinet; Tanya Anisimova, cello; Laura Kaufman, flute; Jessica Krash, piano; Members of the Washington Master Chorale; Thomas Colohan, conductor [Albany Records TROY1716; 1 CD, 73:31; Available from Albany Records, Amazon (USA), iTunes, and major music retailers]

As important to the continued viability of Classical Music as memorable performances by accomplished performers is the emergence of original, compelling compositional voices that communicate the modern world's complex emotional conundrums in musical language that challenges, comforts, and uplifts. The legacies of previous generations of composers, bolstered by works of timeless, universal relevance, are sufficient to preserve the prestige of genre's illustrious history, but its future cannot be secured solely by memories. In the words of the English composer Sir Malcolm Arnold, 'music is the social act of communication among people, a gesture of friendship, the strongest there is,' and the world in this second decade of the Twenty-First Century direly needs gestures of friendship. There is no surer path to friendship than mutual understanding, understanding of the kind that can be found in—and learned from—Bach's *Matthäus-Passion*, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, and Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*, and, above all, it is a quest for compassionate awareness that permeates the music of American composer Jessica Krash. With *Past Made Present*, Albany Records' commitment to providing this superbly unique composer with an avenue into the public conscience is furthered with recordings of music that both manifests and encourages accord achieved through self-examination.

The pieces on *Past Made Present* speak with a creative voice that is at once wonderfully original and gratifyingly familiar. All of the music on this disc reveals an extraordinary gift for part writing on an intimate scale that rivals the work of masters of the Tudor courts of Henry VIII and his daughters Mary and Elizabeth, allied with an innate ability to craft melodic lines that grasp

and retain the listener's attention. Like the music of Brahms, Krash's works disclose a command of form that enables inventiveness. Also like Brahms's best works, especially his chamber music, and Anton Bruckner's remarkable F-major String Quartet, the music on *Past Made Present* is shaped by a bipartite, almost ambiguous sensibility that juxtaposes an abiding aura of disquiet with haunting purity of vision. The profound and the profane coexist, agreeing to disagree, struggling for domination but held in an uneasy—and truthfully human—equilibrium by musical discourse that refuses to take sides. This is music that advocates no 'right' point of view: rather, the sophisticated but appealing harmonic language invites the listener into exchanges that nurture contemplation. Here, there are no prerequisites. Krash's music asks the listener to focus not only on how it resounds in the ears but also on how it reverberates in the heart.

Expertly sung on this disc by twelve voices from Washington Master Chorale under the direction of Thomas Colohan, *Young Vilna* is Krash's harrowing, healing, and heartfelt act of grappling via music with the legacy of the Holocaust among the Jewish communities of her grandfather's native Lithuania. With a text drawn from youngsters' questions addressed to Ellen Cassedy, author of the seminal cultural study *We Are Here*, during her own time of study and self-enrichment in Lithuania, *Young Vilna* unites words of timely poignance with music that often seems to pursue thoughts beyond words' abilities to fully embody emotions. Tenor soloist Eric Lewis emerges from instead of seeking to sing over the chorus, and the delicate fervor of his and his colleagues' singing is equaled by the ideally-balanced playing of violinist Ian Swensen, clarinetist Robert DiLutis, and cellist Tanya Anisimova.

The insightfulness of the composer's use of text emphasizes the ambivalence of the line 'Today's young people live in the present,' suggesting undertones of denial, accusation, and self-doubt beyond the façade of disengagement. The emotional weight of 'Maybe I would have been a killer. Would I have been different?' is intensified by the lightness of Krash's setting: this is a sentiment to be whispered, the possible responses too momentous for public discussion. The repetition of 'Are Jews genetically geniuses?' imparts a subtle crisis of identity, heightened in this performance by the unpretentious immediacy of the choristers' singing. The ambivalence of Krash's treatment of the question 'Do you feel at home?' recalls the final moments of Britten's *Death in Venice*, its protagonist suspended between life and death and wholly at peace in neither state. Reconciliation, resignation, and recrimination echo in Krash's music, pulsing in the subdued passion of this performance.

Krash found both inspiration and texts for the song cycle *Sulpicia's Songs* in Mary Maxwell's wonderfully singable translations of verses written by Sulpicia, a too-little-studied Roman poet and scholar believed to have been active during the reign of the Emperor Augustus. Chauvinistic elements in academia persist in questioning the authorship of the handful of poems attributed to Sulpicia, alleging that the complexities of their language and themes place them beyond the capabilities of even the best-educated women of First-Century Rome. As is true of the collection of sonnets written by someone who may or may not have been christened with the name William Shakespeare, questions about the true identity of the author of Sulpicia's poems in no way lessen their literary and historical value. What cannot be doubted is that an indelible aspect of an artist's rôle in society is to see, sense, and surmise beyond the limitations of her time and place. That debate continues about whether, as a Roman woman of the First Century, Sulpicia could have written these poems is indicative of insecurities and prejudices that have

nothing to do with art.

Accompanied by the composer, soprano Emily Noël gives new life to Sulpicia's words, catapulted into the Twenty-First Century in settings via which Krash spotlights the often uncanny modernity of the poet's conceits. In the opening song, 'At last it's come,' Noël's voice gleams with the enthusiasm of new discovery, and she contrasts this tellingly with the muted feeling with which she delivers the cunningly-crafted melodic lines of 'The hated birthday approaches.' The vocal writing in 'Did you hear?' is challenging in unexpected ways, demanding concentration that the soprano employs to perform the song with complementary control and cogency. Noël's voice, a versatile and splendidly-trained instrument, is always diverting but is exquisitely beautiful in 'I'm grateful,' her flawless placement of tones throughout the range supported by enviable diction, and she subsequently sings 'Fever' with appropriate fervor and an infusion of vocal warmth. The spartan expressivity of 'No longer care for me' is forcefully imparted by Krash's mercurial pianism and seconded by the singer's forthright enunciations of notes and words. 'For pleasure likes a little infamy; discretion is nothing but a tedious pose' is one of the most delightful lines ever set to music by any composer, and Noël and Krash articulate these and all of the lines of 'Let it be known!' with impish humor and playful but polished musicality.

An enchanting pas de deux for flute and piano, *Turns of Phrase* here proves to be a perfect scene-changing interlude between Krash's song cycles. Flautist Laura Kaufman joins the composer in a performance of the piece that sonorously explores all of the music's eponymous turns of phrase. The music's textures are fabricated from artful uses of the interplay between the instruments, hearkening back to Bach's writing for flute in his BWV 1030 - 1032 Sonatas. As in all of the music on *Past Made Present*, though, Krash's idiom is entirely distinctive, learning lessons from the past but applying that knowledge to the development of her own musical vocabulary. At the keyboard in this performance of *Turns of Phrase*, she and Kaufman intertwine thematic material with the skill of dexterous weavers. So eloquent are Kaufman's tones that, in this traversal, *Turns of Phrase* is virtually another song cycle.

More than a millennium closer than Sulpicia in temporal proximity to today's listeners, the minstrel Martin Codax benefits little in increased familiarity from those centuries. Almost every assertion about his work is punctuated by parenthetical question marks. Indeed, dating Codax's life and work to the middle of the Thirteenth Century stems from the chronology of the contributions to the *cantigas d'amigo* in the Pergaminho Vindel commonly attributed to him, verses that uniformly adhere to the strictest form of these refined ballads. Utilizing Daniel Newman's translations from the original medieval Galician, Krash rekindles the perspicacity of her Sulpicia settings with *The Cantigas de amigo* of Martin Codax, again navigating the courses of the texts' physical and psychological landscapes with a seemingly inexhaustible flow of apt musical imagery.

From her first notes in 'Ondas do mar de Vigo,' it is apparent that Noël is as authoritative an interpreter of Krash's Codax songs as of Sulpicia's Songs, and she and the composer collaborate on a reading of the song that is as much a performance of chamber music as an interaction between singer and accompanist. The lulling motion of the sea cascades from Krash's fingers, buoying Noël's shimmering singing. The singer portrays the transition from 'Mandad'ei comigo' to the related but very different 'Mia irmana fremosa' as a significant change of mood, enhancing the shift in perspective with a broad spectrum of vocal colors. Noël's and

Krash's phrasing seizes the meandering momentum of 'Ai Deus, se sab'ora meu' and 'Quantas sabedes amare amigo,' creating in each song an individual microcosm that is also an episode within the cycle's narrative. Like the dénouement and deus ex machina of Greek drama, 'Eno sagrado en Vigo' and 'Ai ondas que en vin veere' escalate and resolve the music's internal struggles, employing the words as catalysts for the music's ultimate evolution. The energy of Noël's singing and Krash's playing electrifies the music, their camaraderie emitting a charge that crackles across the songs' difficult vocal and sentimental intervals. Melodic distinction, niceties of harmony, verbal clarity, and ingenuity are important gauges of a composer's proficiency as a creator of Art Songs, but the foremost test of songs' merit is in how they respond not to study but to singing. In Noël's performances, Krash's songs are confirmed to be works of wit and innovation—and, most endearingly, exceptionally good music.

It is fitting that the final piece on *Past Made Present* should be *Delphi — What the Oracle Said*, an affectionate reminiscence for solo cello of an adolescent visit to Greece. Like a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela for modern Catholics, a visit to Delphi was for denizens of ancient Hellenistic societies both an end, the culmination of an arduous journey, and a beginning, the start of a spiritual voyage guided by the oracle's wisdom—a dichotomy shared by Krash's music. In Anisimova's hands, the timbre of the cello is the voice of a primordial force that has not yet conquered worded speech, a siren call that needs no verbalization to be understood. Anisimova's virtuosity encompasses not only the technical wherewithal to play Krash's music with confidence but also the artistry to deliver this musical monologue with an actor's theatricality. With this music, the oracle speaks of the continuity resilience and renewal, qualities that define the cellist's playing.

Prominent among music's marvels is the power to access regions of the psyche that hide their secrets from ordinary modes of communication. Music can reclaim memories from oblivion and reignite dormant feelings, but it, too, must be reclaimed and reignited in order to survive the indifference of societies too frenetically-paced to stop and listen. Classical Music can never tame the din of modern life, so it must harness it and make of the noises of living a symphony of survival. In the pieces on *Past Made Present*, Jessica Krash transforms the bittersweet sounds of looking back and forging ahead into music that makes sincerity audible.

Joseph Newsome