

AND IF THE SONG BE WORTH A SMILE: SONGS OF AMERICAN COMPOSERS • Lisa Delan (sop); Kristin Pankonin (pn); Susanne Mentzer (mez)¹; Matt Haimovitz (vc)² • PENTATONE 5186 099 (68:45 □)

BOLCOM Four Cabaret Songs. **GETTY** *Poor Peter*. **HEGGIE** ^{1,2}*My true love hath my heart*. Three Folk Songs. **GARNER** ²*Annettes-Lieder*. **CORIGLIANO** Two Cabaret Songs. **L. P. WOOLF** ²*Odas de Todo el Mundo*

Lately I have seen quite a few new CDs focused on the 20th- and 21st-century art song. This is a huge repertoire, and increasing all the time, as tonally oriented neoromantics seem more comfortable with continuing the lineage of song composers like Barber and Rorem than they seem to be with writing symphonies. Of course, depending on the characteristics of the singer, as well as on the particular program chosen, these CDs vary widely in quality, but I have no hesitation in singling out this recent release as worthy of attention from those who are inclined toward this area of the repertoire. The program embraces a number of different styles, and the music ranges from OK to very good, with the majority leaning toward the latter. But especially fine and worthy of attention is the vocal artistry of the American soprano Lisa Delan. Not only does she have an extremely attractive voice, displaying remarkable agility and musical precision, but she imbues her renditions with tremendous personality, which is utilized generously in much of the music included here. And not only that, but she favors contemporary music (though not exclusively). Hearing her handle this program with such aplomb, I long to hear her bring to life some of the other neglected gems of the American art-song repertoire.

My favorite item on this recording is the group of three *Annettes-Lieder* by David Garner, which represents my first acquaintance with this composer. I accept the responsibility for this prior ignorance, as Garner, who is almost 60, has been on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory for many years and has amassed an impressive output. Settings composed in 1986 of poetry by the German contemporary of Schubert, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Garner's three songs stand apart from the rest of the program in their seriousness of expression. These are very beautiful songs, largely somber in cast, and are performed impeccably by Delan with the excellent support of Matt Haimovitz, cellist, and Kristin Pankonin, pianist.

Another new discovery for me is Luna Pearl Woolf, 40-year-old wife of cellist Haimovitz, and a distinguished composer in her own right. Her *Odes de Todo el Mundo* (Odes for Everyone), commissioned by Delan and composed in 2006, is a setting of a poem by Pablo Neruda. Starting with an almost flamenco flavor, the setting is more a dramatic monologue than a "song," as it effectively moves in a variety of musical directions, in its attempt to capture the poet's almost boastful exuberance in his own universality. The 10-minute work provides an excellent opportunity for soprano Delan to display the range of her versatile musical personality.

William Bolcom's Four Cabaret Songs were composed between 1977 and 1985, to extremely clever and witty texts by Arnold Weinstein. Bolcom's music, in its more semi-vernacular but high-

ly sophisticated vein, is ideally suited to the texts, and the songs are ideally suited to Delan's musical personality and vocal gifts, resulting in some great fun. Even more appealing along these lines are John Corigliano's Two Cabaret Songs, set to extremely clever and satirical texts by his partner Mark Adamo, also a composer of some note. Written for William Bolcom and Joan Morris, the first, "Dodecaphonia," dates from 1997. Conjuring a character known as "Twelve-Tone Rose," the song pokes some fun at Serialism, with a final jab at Minimalism. Not only is the poetry clever, but Corigliano's music is as well, enriched by serialist in-jokes. On top of it all, it is so catchy, I found it running through my mind for days. The second song, "Marvelous Invention," was composed four years later, and is not quite as effective. This one pokes fun at a shallow dilettante's enthusiasm for the latest portable listening device. It too is filled with musical and verbal in-jokes that sometimes call the songs of Tom Lehrer to mind, but I fear that its meaning will be indecipherable 25 years from now. Again, Lisa Delan makes the most of these witty morsels.

I have not been terribly impressed by the music I've heard by Gordon Getty. Though I have no problem with his brazen musical conservatism, I find his work too complacent in inhabiting the styles of the past, with the result that a strong individual personality fails to emerge. *Poor Peter*, set to three texts by the composer himself, and written for Delan, is a modern romantic evocation of the world of "Merrie Olde England." These songs are more effective than much of Getty's music that I've heard, although I could have done without the foot-stomping in the second song.

Finally, we come to the offerings of Jake Heggie. His 1996 setting of Philip Sydney's "My true love hath my heart," which features the full complement of the album's personnel, is an effective example of the post-Barber art song. His 1994 settings of three American folk songs are tasteful but unmemorable.

The recording seems to have been produced by Polyhymnia, a Dutch company that aims to achieve the highest levels of recording quality. I am extremely impressed by the sound quality of this disc, in both its standard and SACD manifestations. **Walter Simmons**