

In sum, this CD presents an enjoyable program of intellectually and viscerally compelling music that spans much of the career of a living American composer who deserves to be better known. The playing by members of the New Millennium Ensemble is exemplary, the recorded sound is, for the most part, warm and clear, and the disc is well produced overall.

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John Musto, *Songs*. Bridge CD 9286, 2009.

At a time when art songs by U.S. composers enjoy great popularity, thanks to a slew of talented composers such as Richard Hundley, Lori Laitman, Libby Larsen, Stephen Paulus, and Ned Rorem, a disc of vocal music from John Musto seems well overdue. Bridge's new release *John Musto: Songs* offers a welcome and recommended addition to the recorded repertory. Two cycles, *Viva Sweet Love* and *Quiet Songs*, for baritone and soprano, respectively, and a selection of eight individual songs make up the collection. Singers Amy Burton and Patrick Mason lend their voices with the composer accompanying, and pianist Michael Barrett joins them on the last piece, a duet with four hands at the piano.

Viva Sweet Love consists of five songs set to the poetry of e. e. cummings and James Laughlin. In the first song, "as in the sea marvelous," the piano accompaniment effectively evokes an image of waves, and the song's atmosphere sets the mood for the entire cycle. The second piece, "Rome: In the Café," stands out with its melancholy melody expressed within the accompaniment and at times partially echoed in the vocal line. *Quiet Songs* presents an odd collection of poetry, from Edna St. Vincent Millay, Arthur Symons, Léonie Adams, e. e. cummings, Eugene O'Neill, and a trifle by Ms. Burton herself as the anchor of the cycle ("Intermezzo"). This lack of cohesive poetry makes the cycle difficult to comprehend, and it is unclear why Musto chose to group these texts together. The accompanying notes suggest that the final song, "Lullaby," contains thematic material from the other pieces, thus giving the cycle a sense of unity that the poetry does not provide. Of particular note is "Christmas Carol (To Jesus on His Birthday)," which is an intense and emotional setting reflected in stark writing for both the piano and voice.

Following the two cycles is a quirky group of songs, from the curious "Nude at the Piano" to a setting of the famous Dorothy Parker poem about suicide, "Résumé." "Social Note," also by Parker, is a refreshing change from the mostly languid and slow settings that dominate the collection on this disc, and the frantic quality of the poem emanates from the piano in a masterful show of compositional facility. Throughout the recording, evidence of jazz and blues influences abound. Musto is particularly adept at setting moods and characters in the accompaniments, sometimes to brilliant effect and at other times seemingly at odds with the meaning of the poem. (Why is there no flamenco in "Flamenco"?) Curiously missing in the

vocal writing is melody. Often the accompaniment takes the starring role, leaving the vocal line disjunct, simply punctuating the piano line with the text. This overall lack of lyricism makes moments where a melody does emerge quite precious and memorable, as in “Penelope’s Song.”

Musto’s use of elements from more popular music genres firmly establishes his place among a musically inclusive group of U.S. art song composers (for example, William Bolcom, Ricky Ian Gordon, and Ben Moore). This inclusivity, coupled with the approachable nature of his music for the performer, has led to his considerable popularity. However, the lack of a consistent memorable melody puts Musto at odds with his contemporaries, leaving him in a rather awkward position between the aforementioned peers and composers such as Argento, Hoiby, and Del Tredici, whose difficult music still preserves exceptional melodic vocal writing, perhaps the very place Musto wants to be.

Burton and Mason are masterful communicators, delivering every word with care and precision. It is rare to be able to understand every word from a vocalist, particularly in English, and in this regard these two singers are unparalleled. Both of these beautiful voices display fine technique, although Mason occasionally hangs at the lower side of the pitch, especially in his upper range, and Burton has a tendency to croon in melodic expressions such as “Penelope’s Song,” perhaps intended as a way of expressing the popular western feel of the piece. Musto displays his usual impressive skills as pianist and accompanist, both in sensitivity and in technical display, and in doing so is the true star of the recording.

The accompanying notes leave something to be desired. Roger Evans provides an untitled and meandering opening essay that fails to address Musto’s works until more than halfway through. He mentions a few songs on the disc in the closing paragraphs, giving very little specific information and leaving the reader wishing Musto had written the notes himself. The poems to the opening cycle are printed in a different order than presented on the recording, but the rest of the texts are printed in the proper order, and all authors are attributed.

It is refreshing to have a recording of John Musto’s songs that shows him as more than simply the composer of *Shadow of the Blues*. This important composer deserves a catalog of recordings that equals the diversity and size of his song output. Hopefully this recording will mark the beginning of such a needed collection.

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The Legacy of Mary Lou Williams. The United States Army Field Band Jazz Ambassadors [Fort Meade, Md.], 2007.

One can scarcely suppress a gasp of indignant astonishment after even a cursory perusal of Mary Lou Williams’s résumé: Why is this composer, arranger, key-spanning