

## MEDIA REVIEWS

Anthony de Mare, *Liaisons: Re-imagining Sondheim from the Piano*. ECM New Series, 2470–72 481 1780, 2015, CD.

*Liaisons: Re-imagining Sondheim from the Piano* is the brainchild of pianist-composer Anthony de Mare, who brought together thirty-six other contemporary composers and asked them for a pianistic take on a song by Stephen Sondheim, one of the most celebrated composers of American musical theater.<sup>1</sup> It is an ambitious endeavor, asking composers to unite the seemingly incommensurate worlds of the Broadway musical and contemporary composition, and for the most part it succeeds. De Mare sought composers from a variety of backgrounds, including theater, film, jazz, and avant-garde communities. The result is thirty-seven tracks that span a dizzying array of styles and moods, yet are connected through Sondheim's singular musical voice.

Sondheim was inspired by a wide range of composers, from Richard Rodgers to Milton Babbitt, and many of the composers in *Liaisons* choose to unravel a single thread of influence within the fabric of his sound. Nico Muhly's "Color and Light" (based on the song from *Sunday in the Park with George*), reveals Sondheim's debt to minimalism, recombining and reconfiguring the song's musical motives into a kaleidoscope of sounds and patterns. Musical ideas constantly reemerge in different contexts, filtered through Muhly's swirling, pointillist language, which recalls George Seurat's precise and dense brush-strokes in "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte," the painting at the center of the show. On the other end of the spectrum, Kenji Bunch's "The Demon Barber" evokes the cheap melodramas and *Grand Guignol* of the nineteenth century that inspired *Sweeney Todd*. Lisztian quotations of the "Dies Irae" erupt from low rumbling textures, then give way to pianistic evocations of screams and factory whistles, mixing drama and music in a particularly Sondheimian fashion.

Other composers chose to write musical portraits of Sondheim's colorful range of characters. In a delightfully creative move, Andy Akiho uses a prepared piano to portray the various fairy tale figures of *Into the Woods* in timbre rather than lyrics, and his evocation of the witch is particularly inspired. David Rakowski gives us a psychological exploration of the deeply unhappy Joanne from *Company* in his version of "Ladies Who Lunch" by juxtaposing fragments of the melody, first with dreamy melancholia, then with aggressive jazziness, while Jherik Bischoff plays with Charles Guiteau's (from *Assassins*) tenuous grasp on reality by turning his jaunty hymn into a manic cakewalk.

Many of the composers take Sondheim's songs as the starting point to explore their own lives. Frederic Rzewski's deeply personal interpretation, "I'm Still Here" from *Follies*, becomes a meditation on the loss of a friend. Sondheim's original melody is barely present in this haunting, intense track, which takes the

<sup>1</sup> "Liaisons Project," <http://liaisonsproject.com>.

original—a fierce affirmation of survival—and gives it a meandering, aimless quality. But snippets of the melody break through toward the end, as if to reassure the mourner that the memory of a person—while a poor substitute for their presence—will endure. Tania León also nearly erases Sondheim from her version of “Good Thing Going” from *Merrily We Roll Along* (retitled “Going . . . Gone”). Her Cagian constellations mix with groovy basslines inspired by music from her native Cuba in a halting, moving exploration of nostalgia.

Yet as distinct as these tracks are, Sondheim’s singular musical voice shines throughout the project. His penchant for stumbling, stream-of-consciousness monologues produces a number of tracks that play with motion and time, as musical ideas spin around each other, creating a sense of perpetual motion within a static moment. Sondheim’s wry sense of humor is also on display with the many composers who chose to expand on his penchant for carnivalesque pastiches of vaudeville styles. So too does the inherent melancholy of much of Sondheim’s work come out, even in glosses on the more upbeat numbers. The wistful energy and gloomy shimmer of these tracks reveals Sondheim to be a master of musical contradiction.

Still, despite the variety, it is a shame that some of Sondheim’s most interesting shows are underrepresented in this collection. Sondheim wrote words and music for fifteen Broadway shows. All but two are represented here, but over a third of the tracks (thirteen) come from just two: *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Sweeney Todd*.<sup>2</sup> Given the tight construction of Sondheim’s scores (*Sunday* in particular), the over-representation of these two shows lends a sameness to some sketches in the collection. I would also have appreciated a little more direction from the liner notes; each track is only given about a sentence of description, which makes some of them difficult to follow, especially the more avant-garde compositions. If de Mare hopes to introduce Broadway fans to the world of contemporary composition, a little more guidance for the listener will go a long way.

De Mare has been performing these compositions in recitals across the country, and all are available as sheet music, so other performers may wish to incorporate them into their own repertory. I, for one, hope that will be the case. Although not without some minor flaws (as any experimental project is), *Liaisons* has the potential to unite two disparate communities of American listeners: fans of Broadway and fans of new music. As it stands now, the record is a fascinating contribution to American piano music, and one that I hope will inspire more connections between these two groups.

Naomi Graber



<sup>2</sup> Only *The Frogs* and *Bounce* (which was later rewritten and retitled *Road Show*) are not included. The musicals for which Sondheim contributed lyrics but not music are also not included.