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(In)Habitation: Musical Settings of Margaret Atwood Poetry by American Women Composers. Eileen Stremmel, soprano; Sylvie Beaudette, piano. Centaur Records CRC3002. 2010.

Margaret Atwood, the author of more than thirty-five volumes of fiction, nonfiction, children's literature, and poetry, possesses a singular voice, imbued with artistry, conscience, intention, and power. The recipient of numerous awards, among them the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Booker Prize, and the Governor General's Award, she is acknowledged as one of Canada's finest living writers. Although best known as a novelist, Atwood's earliest published work, *Double Persephone* (1961), is a volume of poetry, only the first of seventeen in this genre that has been released during the course of her career. Her poetry is in free verse, liquid, abundant with humor, irony and terrible, vivid language, and, remarkably, there has been a dearth of Atwood texts represented in the art song repertoire—that is, until now.

In 2004, while Atwood served as visiting professor at Syracuse University, faculty member and soprano Eileen Stremmel recognized the potential of the author's poetry for musical setting. With the author's consent, Stremmel resolved to commission works by leading female composers that would give Atwood's extraordinary words, images, and ideas greater representation in the art song repertoire. Funded by the Howard Hanson Fund at the Eastman School of Music, the Dean's Fund in the College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse University, the Society for New Music, and The Commission Project, composers Judith Cloud, Elisenda Fàbregas, Amanda Harberg, Lori Laitman, Libby Larsen, and Tania Léon each contributed remarkably diverse settings of Atwood's poetry to be performed by Stremmel and collaborative pianist Sylvie Beaudette. *(In)Habitation: Musical Settings of Margaret Atwood Poetry by American Women Composers* is a fitting testament to this rewarding collaboration between author, composers, and performing artists.

(In)Habitation is enhanced by liner notes that provide sufficient context for the Atwood project. The notes by Carol Kimball include back-story, author and composer commentaries, and reprints of the poems. Although the musical settings do not correspond to the original poem texts, the reprinted poems prove to be invaluable when tessitura interferes with clarity of diction.

The recording opens with a song cycle by Judith Cloud, entitled "Night Dreams." Cloud, herself an accomplished singer, chose texts that have a deceptive childlike simplicity, vacillating from reminiscence to menace to fancy. Her use of thirds and sforzando octaves as unifying elements in the piano accompaniments deftly avoids triteness. The candid innocence of Atwood's "Variation on the Word Sleep" is poignantly emphasized by Cloud with a blissfully meandering tune that has all the charm of a five-year-old drifting into peaceful slumber.

Moments of Change, by Elisenda Fàbregas, includes poems dealing with Atwood's recurrent themes of isolation, suffering, victimization, and mortality. Each selection is a first-person vignette, and the two songs "The Moment" and "Habitation" open with the promise of dark, brooding portraits of man's false notions of relationship to

nature and himself. Unfortunately, sudden shifts from singing to speaking mar their continuity, disrupting the narrative flow. The imaginative melody and rhythmic vitality displayed, for instance, in Fàbregas' *Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano* (1994) and *Mirage* (1997) are noticeably absent from this work. Overall, the poems are so poorly set throughout the cycle and Strempele's efforts to maintain linguistic clarity so inadequate, that portions would be entirely unrecognizable were the texts not included in the liner notes.

Like Fàbregas, Lori Laitman chooses first-person narrative texts for the three songs of *Orange Afternoon Lover*. They are also among the longest and most complex of the Margaret Atwood poems that appear on this compilation. It is no surprise that the image of "crack your skull like a walnut, split it like a pumpkin" from Atwood's *Against Still Life* is rendered by Laitman in such a way that it retains incongruous shock value while avoiding derailment of the narrative. Likewise, her setting of the dubiously titled "I Was Reading a Scientific Article" is as buoyantly lyrical and whimsical as any of her many fine Dickinson songs. Although this self-described "accidental song composer"¹ has been compared to Ned Rorem,² *Orange Afternoon Lover* suggests she has much more in common with Samuel Barber by virtue of the sumptuous vocal lines and uncanny ability to craft Atwood's free verse prose so well that it sings like poetry.

Tania Léon brings her confident voice to the *Atwood Songs*, constructing a declamatory dance for the voice and an ebullient romp for the piano. Eileen Strempele's instrument is employed to its best advantage in these pieces on the disc, demonstrating a suppleness that is equaled by the brilliant agility of Sylvie Beaudette at the piano. While Léon, too, is guilty of stretching Atwood's texts onto her rack of melodic angularity, the composer's setting of "Memory" presents a gloomy rumination of repeated notes embellished with flourishes undulating with color and energy. Of all the composers in this compilation, Léon is most effective in her application of spoken text, cleverly used as a punch-lined aside at the conclusion of "Eating Fire" and as a whispered expression of bewildered wonder in "Four Evasions."

The two single song offerings by Amanda Harberg and Libby Larsen are intriguing brevities amid the cycles and sets that make up the bulk of *(In)Habitation*. Harberg's setting of "Memory" is excerpted from *Midnight Songs* and provides a striking contrast to the setting by Tania Léon. The voice begins alone and, after lingering on the "m" of "memory," melts into a series of cantorial melismatic embellishments that are joined by the piano in plaintive counterpoint. Her employment of open fifth chords at several points in the song is vaguely reminiscent of Orff's use as a responsorial pause in the "Veris leta facies" chant from *Carmina Burana*. Libby Larsen's "Take" is a stark and pointed rendering of Atwood's poem "There Are So Many Things I Want You to Have." Characterized by persistent figures in the piano, the voice carries the responsibility for declaiming the text while maintaining a high level of emotional intensity. In many ways the song is evocative of Schumann's "Auf Einer Burg" in its presentation of bitter acquiescence and loss, spare harmonic material in the piano, and the angular melody in the voice progressing to an uneasy resolution.

¹ Lori Laitman, composer: "An unofficial biography," <http://artsongs.com/meet/chattybio>.

² Gregory Berg, "Dreaming: Songs of Lori Laitman," *Journal of Singing* 60/3 (January/February 2004): 321.

Eileen Strempel possesses a remarkable soprano instrument, with a wide array of colors and timbres. She is a skilled, sensitive, intelligent, and thoughtful singer, and one of a small contingent of artists devoting themselves to commissioning and performing works by American women composers. Sylvie Beaudette demonstrates breathtaking expertise and a perpetual supply of hue and nuance that accentuates and complements Strempel in countless ways. Despite poor intonation and mangled diction, and some unfortunate production errors in evidence on the recording and its liner notes, *(In)Habitation: Musical Settings of Margaret Atwood Poetry by American Women Composers* is a praiseworthy testament to the unparalleled genius of Margaret Atwood and the extraordinary efforts of the Strempel-Beaudette duo to continue to expand the American art song repertoire.

Stephanie Tingler



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George Gershwin, *Complete Music for Piano & Orchestra*. Anne-Marie McDermott, piano; Dallas Symphony Orchestra; Justin Brown, conductor. Bridge CD 9252. 2008.

The unusual distinction of this well-performed, well-engineered, and generous disc is encapsulated in its title. Since all of Gershwin's compositions for piano and orchestra—*Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), Concerto in F (1925), Second Rhapsody for Orchestra with Piano (1932), and *Variations on "I Got Rhythm"* (1934)—may demonstrably be accommodated on a single CD, it is surprising that such an obvious and inviting recording project is not regularly attempted. It is usually necessary to purchase a 2-CD compilation of Gershwin's complete orchestral music to obtain recordings of all four works with piano in a single package, and in such cases the performances of these works might come from studio dates widely separated in time, or may not even feature the same artists. The disc under consideration here presents the four works from a uniform perspective, employing the same performers, and all recorded in a span of three days. Anne-Marie McDermott plays Gershwin's demanding piano parts with stylish verve and admirable technique, and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra under guest conductor Justin Brown provides very competent, if occasionally heavy-handed, support.

The opportunity provided by this disc to compare the canonic *Rhapsody in Blue* directly with its little-known successor, the Second Rhapsody, is an exceptional one that should be relished by the listener; in fact, the direct juxtaposition of the two works on this particular CD permits hearing them in succession without so much as engaging a "program" function. The Second Rhapsody is indeed the "black sheep" of this extended family of four Gershwin compositions, and unjustly so. The perennially popular *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Concerto in F have constituted an obvious pairing since the early days of LPs, and recent single CDs have frequently added the *Variations on "I Got Rhythm"* as a "filler" to accompany these two, but the Second Rhapsody is still not commonly encountered, either in live performance