

CD REVIEW

Helen Hopekirk, Piano Music

Gary Steigerwalt *pf*
Toccata Classics 430, 2017 (1 CD: 58 minutes)

Born in Portobello, near Edinburgh, at the end of the Crimean War, Helen Hopekirk (1856–1945) had a lifetime that spanned an eventful period, both musically and politically. Musically she remained a creature of the nineteenth century – a student at Mendelssohn’s Konservatorium in Leipzig and an obvious admirer of Chopin, Schumann and Liszt, whose music clearly influenced her own composition. She deserves to be better known today, not just musically but also for her career, which rivalled that of her older contemporary Clara Schumann and took her well beyond Scotland’s borders to Europe and America. Married to a man who supported her fully in her career, and with no children, she was able to pursue an active concert life for some years before turning to composition. In 1897 she accepted an invitation to teach at the New England Conservatory in Boston, where she died in 1945, having contributed to that city’s musical culture as a pianist and composer while maintaining her strong Scottish roots.

This recording, which comes with helpful, detailed liner notes by pianists Gary Steigerwalt and Dana Muller (author of the first dissertation on Hopekirk, in 1993), provides a balanced view of this remarkable woman, giving particular attention to her strong Scottish identity. Bringing her pianistic virtuosity to bear on her composition, Hopekirk wrote prolifically for the piano, also producing many songs and some instrumental works. In Steigerwalt’s selection, her power as a pianist of Lisztian proportions stands out above all else: Hopekirk had in fact met Liszt and had hoped to study with him, but his death propelled her eastwards to Vienna, where she had lessons at various times with the Russian pianist and pedagogue Theodor Leschetizky. This training evidently never left her, nor did the earlier strict training she received from Lichtenstein in Edinburgh and at the Leipzig Konservatorium from Jadassohn and Reinecke. Her complete control of the vast resources of the piano merges with her excellent compositional technique, particularly in counterpoint, as is particularly evident in each of Steigerwalt’s masterful renditions of her pieces.

On this disk Hopekirk comes across as an unabashed Romantic with a distinctive voice, though later works such as ‘Shadows’, the first of *Two Compositions for Piano* (1924), show her experimenting with impressionistic textures, clearly influenced by Debussy. Her expertise in scoring for orchestra is evident here, too, in her placing of some of the melodic material in the left hand, reminiscent of a cello line, a feature that is characteristic of much of her work. The playful *Robin Good-fellow* (1922), while still indebted to a Romantic tonal vocabulary, scampers

gleefully over the keys, its playfulness, effortless virtuosity and even subject matter somewhat reminiscent of her younger contemporary Percy Grainger.

Like Grainger, Hopekirk was fascinated by folk music, turning to her Scottish roots for inspiration. Much of the disk is devoted to this Scottish repertoire, a distinctive aspect of her work and career. The set that opens the disk, three pieces from *Iona Memories* with poetic titles, was composed mainly in Boston, after her visit to Iona in the summers of 1901–03 and then in 1907. Hopekirk also published *70 Scottish Songs*, in 1905, with rather more interesting piano accompaniments than those of her contemporary Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, who at the same time was collecting Gaelic songs in the Scottish Isles. Some of these formed the basis of solo piano works based on the songs, of which Steigerwalt performs three: 'Land o' the Leaf', 'Turn to Me' and the sprightly 'Eilidh Bhan', redolent with the rhythms and pentatonicism of the original song, which came from a collection, *The Celtic Lyre*. All feature imaginative harmonies and pianistic writing, somewhat reminiscent of Liszt's settings of Schubert songs, which Hopekirk knew and played. Hopekirk drew on Kennedy-Fraser's work in the Hebrides in her final work for piano, *Two Tone Pictures*: 'Shadow' catches the Highland drive and playfulness, again reminiscent of Grainger, while 'Sea Joy' is more atmospheric, incorporating some Debussian textures. Both make superb concert pieces.

Steigerwalt gives us a glimpse into Hopekirk's early works, beginning with her earliest published work, *Romance* (1886), with a lyrical middle section featuring a Schumannesque melody. *Sundown* (1905), one of her most popular works, was dedicated to a fellow pupil from her Leipzig days and showcases her gift for writing a soaring melody complemented by imitation in the left hand. Destined for the drawing room, it must have daunted some amateurs with its use of three staves and key signatures of six sharps and six flats. The *Serenade*, also in six sharps, dating from 1891 and dedicated to the pianist and arts promoter Susan Lee Warner, is a bravura piece complete with Lisztian octaves, all effortlessly managed by Steigerwalt.

Hopekirk maintained a strong interest in J.S. Bach, though like most of her contemporaries she did not perform his works in public. After meeting Arnold Dolmetsch in 1908 in Boston, where she bought one of the harpsichords he was building for the Chickering piano firm, she wrote a number of pieces in neo-Baroque style, though these remain firmly pianistic and avoid any hint of a dry harpsichord sound. They were compared favourably with Grieg's *Holberg Suite*; Debussy's *Suite pour le piano* and Ravel's *Tombeau de Couperin* also spring to mind. In fact, inspired by Dolmetsch, Hopekirk prepared an edition of ten pieces by François Couperin. Steigerwalt provides examples of a sarabande, minuet (which turns into a waltz in the middle section) and aria from her *Suite for Piano* (1917) in addition to the 'Serenata maestoso' from the *Serenata Suite*, which followed a year later. While these are all accomplished pieces, Hopekirk seemed more at home in the unpublished Waltz in F-sharp major, written around the same time, dedicated to her friend, the Polish pianist Antoinette Szumowska-Adamowska. This is an affectionate, witty homage to Chopin, making its way through some interesting chromatic adventures before its final flourish – the ideal encore piece.

Hopekirk's compositions remain mostly out of print and are difficult to find, though there are some items on IMSLP, and the Hildegard Publishing Company has published the *Serenata*. *70 Scottish Songs* has been reissued by Dover and is readily available, but the piano arrangements mentioned above are not. All of the music used in this recording is held in the Library of Congress. Hopekirk

was clearly an extraordinary musician and deserves to be recognized for her pianistic and compositional achievements as well as for her contribution to Scottish music. Performing and recording her music will do much more for her legacy than the blue plaque acknowledging her birthplace in Portobello.

Steigerwalt plays with conviction and flair, bringing out melodic and contrapuntal lines and exploiting the rich possibilities of the keyboard, which Hopekirk herself did so adeptly. The tone is never forced, and the changing moods of the music are well captured. Steigerwalt plays much as one imagines Hopekirk herself would have done: there are powerful moments mixed with lyricism, and the technique is at all times assured and commanding. These pieces should find a wider audience, particularly among technically proficient students (and their teachers) who would like to move beyond the canonical repertory of Schumann, Chopin and Liszt. Beware the hurtling octave passages, though: these are not pieces for the faint-hearted or small-handed, and they need to be played on a good instrument. There is much to commend in this music, and Steigerwalt is a powerful and persuasive advocate.

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