

Pritchard's performance captures beautifully. The suitably dark *Tenebrae* (1976) is another eight-minute work that contains some remarkably varied playing—both dynamically and rhythmically. This piece, like others in this recording, exploits various extended techniques including tapped strings and glissandi inside the piano, as well as the use of the resonant possibilities of silently depressed keys à la Schoenberg's op. 11. *Ephemera*, a collection of five character pieces, makes use of ghostly string harmonics to great effect. The longest piece featured on this recording, the late work *Horizons* (1985) begins with a lyrical arpeggio that almost suggests G minor, followed by impressionistic tremolo chords that lead into a simple white-note melody marked "tranquillo." Pritchard carries the long line here with brio. A recurring two-note descending third motive seems to pervade several of the pieces, sometimes in the high register, sometimes low, sometimes played in harmonics or plucked. In a program note to one of the pieces ("Angelus" from *Ephemera*), Pentland quotes John Donne's famous poem that bids us not ask for whom the bell tolls. Could these descending thirds be the haunting sounds of those tolling bells? My hermeneutic side would certainly like to think so.

Jonathan Goldman



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Adam Sherkin, *As At First*. Centredisques CMCCD 18212, 2012.

Trained at the Glenn Gould Conservatory in Toronto and the Royal College of Music in London, Adam Sherkin (b. 1982) is a Canadian composer-pianist who brings a deep knowledge of tradition to his compelling, audience-focused music. In a video on his web page, Sherkin expresses concern that the audience for classical music is dwindling, and hopes that his compositions are "relevant to society today."<sup>1</sup> His compositional style attempts to satisfy the tastes of contemporary listeners and acknowledge the rich influence of music history. As his 2012 debut recording, *As At First*, illustrates, he is also a highly proficient pianist who gives his audience emotive, commanding performances.

*As At First* introduces us to Sherkin's multidimensional compositional voice. The opening work, *German Promises* (2011), responds to the rich world of German musical heritage. As he writes in the liner notes, the five movements offer not a musical reflection of older styles, but rather a "subjective perspective" of "promised truths" and "new realities." His own style, which centers on particular pitches but is not tonal, focuses on gestures that generate phrases from their unfolding and expanding. The first movement, "Expectation (*Erwartung*)," for example, begins with a bright, repeated, circular figuration that subsides into an almost random

<sup>1</sup> <http://adamsherkin.com/>

clustering of gestures in the upper piano range, feeling like the tail end of a rainstorm after a steady downpour. The fourth movement, "Heyday (*Glanzheit*)," presents a good example of his style with figures beginning in the mid-range of the piano and gradually, through repetition, moving into a compelling conclusion at either end of the keyboard range. The final movement, "Misstep (*Unfall*)," works with a motoric rhythm that falls out of sync and leads to dramatically dissonant chordal gestures. The title of this movement appears to name its dissonance and collapse as an accident. Does this overall narrative perhaps refer to the composer's take on the arc of German history? Or perhaps the decline of the traditional music's popularity because of modernism's shift? The literal meaning is not given, but Sherkin does not shy away from atonal composition, as he shows in subsequent works on the CD.

*German Promises* is followed by *Amadeus A.D.* (2006), an homage commemorating the sesquicentenary of Mozart's birth. In what Sherkin terms a "miniature fantasy for keyboard," we hear a general expression of sadness in the solemn dissonant chords and whole-tone harmonies, and then a high faint echo of the Classical-era style of a major key melody with a remote and faded Alberti-bass. The chords from the beginning return to overshadow the high figurations, but then voices in the middle register take on the Mozart-like passage, which itself soon devolves. The piece compellingly depicts a contemporary perspective of the more orderly styles of a distant past.

*Daycurrents* (2009) musically investigates the "structures at play in sonata form," as Sherkin writes in the liner notes. He indicates that it was conceived as a "precedent" for Franz Joseph Haydn's last piano sonata, noting that the original inspiration for this piece is Haydn's musical cipher "B-A-D-D-G," for which Sherkin gives no references. The music begins with "archetypal pairings of 'Fast' and 'Slow,'" and one can hear echoes of these five tones in the first theme; however, the implications of dominant-tonic motion here do not move the piece into tonality. What we hear is a brief introduction of two themes, which then develop in a rocky relationship that leads to disparate articulations of both in a widening pianistic pitch range. The final section returns peace to the work by sounding repeating chords that center on A440. Although this piece is musically compelling, I find it burdened by the verbiage of the liner notes; its aural presence as music presents much more drama and beauty.

Sherkin writes that title work, *As At First* (2011), "celebrates the possibilities of musical directness in our own time." The first movement, "Speed Trace," rushes forward in a celebration of pianistic energy that Sherkin hopes will "[cultivate] . . . what might be meaningful to the human listener." The movement becomes most interesting at its dissonant conclusion, and then segues without interruption into a slow second movement, "Echoes and Acorns." The third movement, "The Denim Ghost," whose curious title is left unexplained, has a joyous, irrepressible exuberance. I would suggest that it achieves Sherkin's goal of "musical directness," even if the title remains mysterious.

The *Three Preludes* (2003) presents one of the most impressive contributions to this album. The first movement, "Breach," is based on five common intervals: major second, perfect fourth, major/minor sixth and a major third. Its meditative quality

is not static, but rather shifts through different registers in thoughtful expressions. Entitled “Impasse,” the second movement is based on a twelve-tone row. Its opening material returns in the last section, which gives a sense of direction and place to the dissonant pointillist gestures. The third prelude, “Eclipse,” carries a more lyrical and introspective quality in its opening. Its second section charges through a contrasting embattled dissonant passage before returning to brighter, softer gestures. The *Three Preludes* show a high level of skill in atonal composition and expression.

The final two pieces, *Meditations* (2006) and *Sunderdance* (2008), convey distinct personal and artistic voices. The *Meditations* are short, intimate pieces constructed on the nineteenth-century idea of *moments musicaux*, with each movement title recalling a personal event or time with someone in the composer’s life. As Sherkin shares in the liner notes, *Sunderdance* found its inspiration in a passage from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929): “the beauty of the world . . . has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder.” The two “edges” form two musical characters in Sherkin’s work, one high-pitched and brightly melodic and the other darker and more turbulent with loud, dissonant chordal patterns. In three parts, the piece allows these characters to combine and interact in numerous ways, conveying the idea that they are two parts of the same whole. In *Sunderdance*, as with all the works on this compelling, expertly performed debut CD, *Sherkin* gives the listener something to apprehend, enjoy and contemplate.

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Guy Klucevsek, *Polka from the Fringe*. Starkland ST-218, 2012, 2 CDs.

Accordionist Guy Klucevsek and his producers must have sensed that two CDs of “polkas, pseudo-polkas, and decimated polkas” might warrant explanation—and a good dose of humor. The liner notes explain how, back in the 1970s and 1980s, Klucevsek invited his colleagues to unite under a “Polka freak-flag,” commissioning a variety of composers to write boundary-stretching polkas for the accordion.<sup>1</sup> The resulting twenty-nine track album—compiled from recordings originally released in the 1980s and 1990s—is infused with Klucevsek’s prankster spirit and sense of irony, elevating the popular genre to the level of art while deflating the pretense of art music traditions.

Klucsevsek’s training helps explain the album’s contradictory impulses. He studied classical accordion from his teens and received formal training in composition during college, but the latter experience especially left him frustrated by the

<sup>1</sup> All quotes in this review are taken from the liner notes of *Polka from the Fringe*, by Elliott Sharp and Guy Klucsevsek.