

RECORDING REVIEWS

David Del Tredici, *Gotham Glory: Complete Piano Works, Volume 1*. Marc Peloquin, piano. Naxos 8.559680, 2012.

Although David Del Tredici remains best known for his vocal music, in particular his Lewis Carroll settings, he has composed for a variety of media, including solo piano. Boosey & Hawkes has published a number of these pieces in two volumes (*Piano Album* and *Piano Album II*); and in 2012, Naxos released, under its American Classics label, a recording of several of these pieces with Marc Peloquin at the keyboard, the first installment of what promises to be Del Tredici's "Complete Piano Works."

Co-produced by the composer, this 2012 release, *Gotham Glory*, includes four stand-alone pieces—*Aeolian Ballade* (2008), *Ballad in Lavender* (2004), *Ballad in Yellow* (1997), and *S/M Ballade* (2006)—along with a four-movement tone poem, *Gotham Glory (Four Scenes of New York City)*, whose individual movements are entitled "West Village Morning (Prelude)," "Museum Piece (Fugue)," "Missing Towers (Perpetual Canon)," and "Wollman Rink (Grand Fantasy on The Skaters' Waltz)." Conveniently, the scores to all these pieces can be found in *Piano Album II*.

Del Tredici has provided programmatic explanations for these assorted titles. Originally a harp solo, *Aeolian Ballade* makes use of the aeolian mode; *Ballad in Lavender* references the color associated with the homophile movement; *Ballad in Yellow* presents a piano version of an earlier setting of some verse from Federico García Lorca's *Four Yellow Ballads*; and *S/M Ballade* alludes not only to the composer's friends, pianist Marc Peloquin and the latter's partner Seth Slade, but also sadomasochism—"its rigor, its rugged insistence and its almost painful pianistic difficulties bring to my mind the intensity of the S/M experience," states the composer in the preface to *Piano Album II*.¹ For its part, *Gotham Glory* offers successive reflections on a morning walk in Greenwich Village, New York's "museum riches," the destroyed World Trade Center, and the Wollman Skating Rink in Central Park.

(Not all this background information can be found in the liner notes, which are derived from the composer's more complete "notes" that preface the second Boosey collection. Notably, the liner notes fail to mention both the connection between *Ballad in Lavender* and the homophile movement, and that between the *S/M Ballade* and sadomasochism.)

On a certain level, these Del Tredici pieces function as salutations to their varied dedicatees. One section of the *Aeolian Ballade* even builds on the notes G-R (*re* = D)-A-C-E in honor of the original harp composition's dedicatee, Grace Cloutier. *Ballad in Lavender*, subtitled "Portrait-Fantasy on the Letters/Notes/Name B, R (*re* = D), U (*u* = C), C, E," similarly weaves into the music the first name of its dedicatee, pianist Bruce Levingston.

¹ David Del Tredici, "Composer's Notes," *Piano Album II* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 2009), n.p.

This music by and large falls in the tradition of Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and Franck, with echoes, too, of Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner, and Brahms, and hints of Rachmaninoff, Ives (as in the “Hurdy-Gurdy” passage in the “Wollman Rink”), and others. In discussing *Ballad in Lavender*, which quotes *Kreisleriana* in part because the work was “originally programmed to precede a performance of Schumann’s magnificent *Kreisleriana*,” Del Tredici singles out Schumann in particular as “my favorite romantic composer.”² And the influence of Schumann, over and above any stylistic resemblance (although manifest enough in “West Village Morning”), can be felt in a certain obsessiveness that characterizes this music, as in the composer’s tendency to insistently sequence and repeat materials.

These pieces seem, indeed, far more enthralled by the Romantic era than the composer’s own, notwithstanding the music’s complex harmonic palette and some frankly wayward passages (not to mention the use of plucked strings in “Missing Towers”). In this sense, the music presents a markedly different profile from that of John Corigliano, a composer with whom Del Tredici is routinely paired, or even of much of Del Tredici’s earlier work. Rather, these pieces project an atmosphere of plush Victorian concert halls and salons, and one can imagine the music fitting comfortably alongside the likes of Sigismund Thalberg or Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Such an aesthetic risks easy dismissal, for all the composer’s obvious artistry and craft. The *S/M Ballade* poses another sort of provocation, as we are asked to imagine some musical transmutation of the sadomasochistic experience by way of whacks of forte and insinuating chromatic lines.

At the same time, these pieces reveal a predilection for classic contrapuntal devices: *Aeolian Ballade* and *S/M Ballade* both break into fugues, and “Museum Piece” is entirely a fugue, “Missing Towers,” a canon. “Wollman Rink” similarly features a canon. Del Tredici further complements the virtuosity of the piano writing with ingenious juxtapositions of contrasting themes, using the age-old term “quodlibet” in these scores as he has in the past. It is this combination of traditional contrapuntal procedures with a rich harmonic vocabulary that recalls, for this listener, César Franck especially.

Notwithstanding their youthful vigor, delicate beauty, and real charm, these pieces tend to overstay their welcome. Del Tredici has long shown a tendency toward prolixity, disjointedness, and incongruity, and when put in the service of the funhouse whimsy of, say, his Carroll-inspired works, such impulses can come across as appealingly wacky. But aside from the “Wollman Rink,” there’s not much humor here, and without the special appeal of the composer’s masterful orchestral writing, the long forms bog down after a while. Some of these pieces take an inordinately long time just to end. For such reasons, the more modest pieces, including *Ballad in Yellow*, “West Village Morning,” and the haunting “Missing Towers,” seem the most successful of the lot.

This is highly demanding music, and Marc Peloquin acquits himself admirably, with skill and flair. A performance with still greater bravura might prove these pieces

² Del Tredici, “Composer’s Notes.”

more compelling than they appear here. But for now, these pieces—although the work of a gifted composer rendered sensitively by a fine performer—seem among Del Tredici's lesser efforts.

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Grant Park Chorus, *Songs of Smaller Creatures and Other American Choral Works*. Christopher Bell, conductor; James Ginsburg, producer. Cedille Records CDR 90000 131, 2012.

Cedille Records is a trademark of the Chicago Classical Recording Foundation, a not-for-profit foundation that promotes musicians in the Chicago area. In this new recording, Cedille has presented the outstanding Grant Park Chorus in a most unusual collection of unaccompanied choral works.

As its title suggests, this collection includes “songs of smaller creatures” and “other” works. The smaller creatures include bees, a spider, a fly, and butterflies. The subjects of the “other” pieces include characters from *The Simpsons*, David's lamentation on the death of Absalom, and Alice in Wonderland. Trying to find commonality in the contents of this well-performed collection of recent American choral works is probably unwise.

With such diverse selections, the programming offers a few difficulties. For example, after twirling around with the lofty butterflies of Lee Kesselman's *Buzzings: Three Pieces about Bees* (1976), the disc takes the listener solidly down to earth with Eric Whitacre's somber, eleven-minute work, *When David Heard* (1998–99). After the heady flights of small creatures, David's lamentation on the death of his son Absalom comes as a jolt. *Buzzings* calls for much in the way of choral pyrotechnics, including buzzing and very quick singing. *When David Heard* is mournful and plodding; it builds to a huge crescendo and then repeats “my son” so many times the listener nearly rebels. This is not a disc to insert in one's car player on the way to work; this music needs serious attention.

The disc is accompanied by an excellent twenty-six-page booklet with extensive background information on the composers and their works provided by Richard E. Rodda. Texts are included for all the works except for Paul Crabtree's *Five Romantic Miniatures* (1999). Those are very short works, each with a text by one of the characters from *The Simpsons*. For example, in the third piece, “Homer,” the character of the same name expresses his love for his wife, exclaiming, “Marge, you make the best pork chops!” The texts of many of the pieces on this disc are a bit difficult to understand without the accompanying booklet. This is not the fault of the chorus: their diction, like their intonation and expressiveness, is outstanding. The fault, for lack of a better word, lies in the tempi of some of the pieces and their complex textures and harmonies.