



INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR WOMEN IN MUSIC

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CoroDelantal performing at the 14th-century Sinagoga del Agua in Úbeda, Spain, with dancer Gerson A. de Sousa.

# REVIEWS AND PUBLICATIONS

## COMPACT DISC REVIEWS

### Juliana Hall: *Bold Beauty*

Molly Fillmore, soprano; Elvia Puccinelli, piano.  
Blue Griffin, BGR559 (2021)

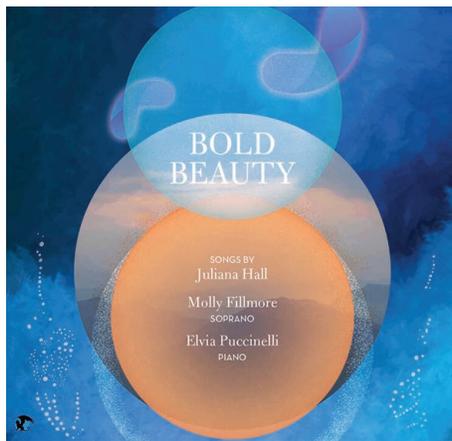
STEFANIA DE KENESSEY

Composer Juliana Hall (b. 1958) has risen steadily in the last decades as one of our foremost proponents and practitioners of the art song. Her output is astonishing, not only for its variety and sheer quantity (with more than sixty song cycles and monodramas to her credit), but more importantly, for its inventiveness and grace. Her sensitivity to text is superb, and her loving treatment of the human voice has made her justly renowned among singers worldwide. The latest CD to showcase Hall's creativity is *Bold Beauty* with four different song cycles for voice and piano. The collection demonstrates the breadth of the composer's range and gives us a glimpse into her artistic trajectory.

The disc opens with eight *Letters from Edna St. Vincent Millay* (1993), about which I must issue a brief warning: the pedestrian song titles of this set are entirely misleading. As the composer remarks, "Millay's letters are almost poetry themselves; they paint such vivid pictures... of her relationships with people (both famous and not)

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*Bold Beauty*

and of her emotions."<sup>1</sup> Hall captures this range beautifully, moving from the sweetly triadic, deeply poetic ending of the first letter: "To Mr. Ficke and Mr. Brynner" ("Then let my message like an arrow dart/And pierce a way into the world's great heart") to the gentle, dissonance-inflected, humorous opening of the seventh letter: "To Arthur Davison Ficke" ("It's not true that life is one damn thing after another").

The cycle *Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush* (1989), next on the CD, represents Hall's first interest in setting letters rather than poems; this time, she turns to Emily Dickinson's letters, which are witty and charming and "are as lyrically inspired as her poetry, with as much musicality within them as any composer could ask for, making them perfect subjects for musical expression."<sup>2</sup> The musical renderings are generally lyrical, measured in pace, sparsely textured, and almost white in color (like Dickinson's distinctive dress) but tinged with a mild dissonance that hints at inner turbulence. The penultimate sixth song, addressed to Susan Gilbert Dickinson and beginning with "I wept a tear here," is particularly moving in its melancholy simplicity.

*Theme in Yellow* (1990) returns to more traditional territory with an eclectic grouping of poems. Carl Sandburg holds the place of honor, with four poems, while Amy Lowell and Edna St. Vincent Millay are each represented

<sup>1</sup> Liner notes for J. Hall, *Bold Beauty*, Blue Griffin BGR55, 2021, CD [7].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid [5].

by one. Here, the central theme is autumn, seen from diverse perspectives, and the musical realizations are pitch-perfect. Sandburg's utterances are agitated, unpredictable, and restless and are mirrored in both the vocal and piano parts. Lowell's November darkness penetrates through the singer's low, sustained, almost vibrato-free tones; and Millay's lament for the past is breathtaking in its aching beauty.

The disc concludes with *Cameos*, six songs that reflect contemporary concerns about gender equity, and inclusion. The texts are provided by the mezzo-soprano on this recording, the doubly-gifted Molly Fillmore, who explains: "The idea for this cycle came while watching an episode of *Antiques Roadshow*. One of the pieces analyzed was a painting by a female American artist from the early 20th century... I wondered how many female artists we should know about, and do not, because their work was not created by a man. This inspired me."<sup>3</sup> The songs celebrate a group of women artists who are not household names but

<sup>3</sup> Ibid [10].

## Recent CD Release

### *Red Dragonfly: Trombone music by women composers*

Jemie Robertson, Assistant Professor of Trombone, University of Florida, released his fourth solo album, *Red Dragonfly*, this winter in both CD and digital download formats. Robertson collaborated with pianist Jasmin Arakawa on the recording, which showcases trombone-music by women composers: Amy Beach, Amy Mills, Florence Price, Barbara York, Saskia Apon, and Sonya Leonore Stahl. The album also includes an arrangement of *O vis eternitatis* by Hildegard von Bingen featuring trumpet player Randolph Lee. To purchase, see [www.markcustom.com](http://www.markcustom.com).

whose work clearly deserves deeper scrutiny: Sarah Albritton (b. 1936), an African-American artist growing up in small-town Louisiana; Kay WalkingStick (b. 1935), a Native American landscape artist from the Southwest; Nellie Mae Rowe (b. 1900), an African-American artist working in Georgia; Alice Dutton Brown (b. 1939), from upstate New York; Agnes Lawrence Pelton (b. 1881), who specialized in paintings of Pueblo Native Americans; and Corita Kent (b. 1918), a former religious sister dedicated to social justice. Hall's song cycle is loosely modeled on Poulenc's *Le travail du peintre* (with lyrics by Paul Éluard), which offers musical portraits

of Picasso, Chagall, Braque, Gris, Klee, Miró, and Villon. Hall's interpretation gives ample voice to each woman artist. The music is sometimes jazzy, sometimes humorous, sometimes complex, sometimes unabashedly simple, but always, always sensitive to the text, to the subtext, and to the voice.

The performers on this disc are gifted and multi-talented. They imbue the entire recording with joy, life, and vibrancy. Singer Molly Fillmore, who provided both the idea and the poetry for *Cameos*, has an astounding vocal range. She sang both soprano and mezzo-soprano roles in prestigious houses such as the Metropolitan Opera,

among others. Her diction is superb and her legato is flawless, and she conveys a full range of emotions, from pathos to humor. Likewise, pianist Elvia Puccinelli is a first-rate keyboard player. Since Hall's songs often feature preludes and postludes prominently, she has her work cut out for her, but she meets the challenge superbly. She is the founder and executive director of the International Keyboard Arts Society, the first such organization dedicated exclusively to collaborative pianists. Both Fillmore and Puccinelli are on the faculty at the University of North Texas in Denton, where *Bold Beauty* was recorded. The disc is highly recommended.

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## Juliana Hall: "Silly Sallie" in *Beneath the Sky*

Zoe Allen, soprano; Christopher Allen, piano. Shokat Projects, SP-101 (2021)

STEFANIA DE KENESSEY

Hall's music can also be heard on *Beneath the Sky*, a CD offering eighteen different songs grouped by the theme of mothering and childhood by fourteen different composers. These range from Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, and Charles Ives to more contemporary figures such as Nico Muhly, Eric Whitacre, Ricky Ian Gordon, Maury Yeston, Steven Lutvak, and Morten Lauridsen. Women are represented on the disc with offerings by Florence Price, Missy Mazzoli, Georgia Stitt, and Juliana Hall.

"Silly Sallie" is excerpted from Hall's cycle *Songs of Enchantment*, a relatively early work, dating from 1989. It is a setting of ten poems by Walter de la Mare. In this miniature song, lasting just one minute, Hall displays her considerable comic gifts, including a humorous piano postlude. The exemplary performances are by the husband-and-wife team of Zoe Allen, soprano, and Christopher Allen, piano. Her voice is limpid and clear, with enormous agility and flexibility, and her diction is flawless. The piano accompaniment is sensitive, nuanced, and invariably intelligent.

The recording is issued by Shokat Projects, founded by Zoe Allen to support the commissioning of interdisciplinary artistic visual and performance projects.<sup>4</sup> If there is one small quibble with the disc, it is that the printed booklet is only four pages long, double-sided, and crammed to the brim with information and with poems that are transcribed with dashes, losing their original form. But this minor reservation aside, undoubtedly the result of financial pressures, *Beneath the Sky* is an important contribution to the art song repertoire and provides a powerful, insightful testament to the continued importance of the genre.

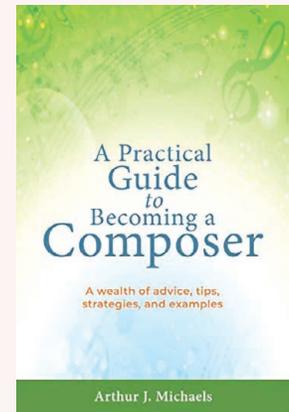
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4 Liner notes for *Beneath the Sky*, Shokat Projects, SP-101 (2021), [3].

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Stefania de Kenessey is a composer working in a wide variety of genres and venues. Her radical operatic reimagining of Tom Wolfe's classic novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* ([www.bonfiretheopera.com](http://www.bonfiretheopera.com)) updated the story of greed and corruption to the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange. She is Professor of Music at the New School and has served as the Dean of Eugene Lang College, undergraduate division, and Chair of the MA program in Liberal Studies at the graduate level. She is the founding president of the IAWM. [www.stefaniadekenessey.com](http://www.stefaniadekenessey.com)

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## Arthur J. Michaels: A Practical Guide to Becoming a Composer

The book offers a wealth of advice, tips, strategies, and examples to advance one's skill as a composer. The book includes useful insights by IAWM member Rain Worthington and a diverse, international group of 24 composers on effective ways to increase a composer's creativity and productivity. The book is recommended for both beginning and advanced composers. Paperback and kindle editions are available on Amazon.