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# *Journal*

of the  
***iawm***  
international alliance for women in music



Eline Cote

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The fourth rose miniature, titled “Con Voce,” gently introduces the human voice. Deserno’s voice emerges from the cello sound and combines with it, creating a brief heterophony, then harmony, with the cello line. This divergence of pitch between cello and voice sets up the instrumental double stops that are prominent in the next two movements, “Feroce” and “Largo.” The final movement, entitled “Dal niente,” represents the seventh summons, which the poet expects to be answered. However, it ends feeling unresolved to this listener, an open question leading, as its title suggests, into a long silence. As one ponders if the poet’s final summons was successful, Bach’s Suite No. 1 in G major begins, resolving the uncertainty with its familiar and comforting sonorities and undulations.

As the CD liner notes point out, no manuscript in Bach’s hand exists for these cello suites. This is both challenging and liberating for the performer, creating many possibilities for choosing articulations, phrasing, and dynamics, in addition to the era-appropriate liberty in ornamentation. Denesco’s performance shows a coherent and thoughtful interpretation of both Suites. Her ornamentation on the repeats of the binary, stylized dance movements is inventive yet appropriate and leaves one anticipating each repeat to hear what ornamentation will be employed.

The next work is very appropriately placed in the sequence, as Dinescu’s *Kleine Suite*, 2018, was written, at Deserno’s request, in response to the Bach Suites. As Bach used stylized dance in his suites, Dinescu’s writing is often steeped in Romanian folk music, with its relationship to dance as “intuitive physical expression.” Bach is not directly quoted, nor are we aware of fragments of folk dance, but rather “traces of remembrance of dance gestures which discharge themselves in fluctuating movements” (Dinescu).

The light usage of the human voice in *Sieben Rosen* becomes more independent and expressive in the *Kleine Suite*, but is still used sparingly, enhancing and expanding the cello’s voice, never taking the foreground. There are gestures that are clearly rooted in the language of Bach but already transformed and creating points of departure for the expanded palette of sounds of cello and voice. The pitch range of about 2.5 octaves in Bach expands to the instru-

ment’s entire four-plus octave range, further augmented by Deserno’s voice.

The first movement, “Libero,” begins by taking us from Bach’s G major tonal world with a quick explosive gesture and immediately introducing the most avant-garde sounds heard yet on the album, widening the palette of sounds and pitch range immediately. Trill figures, which serve an ornamental function in Bach, expand into their own larger gestures and cascades of sound. This is hinted at in “Molto Rubato” and becomes even more prevalent in “Vivo,” expanding the range of undulation.

Many techniques are employed, including ponticello, glissandi, pizzicato, and harmonics which extend the available range and timbre further—but they never seem to be effects simply for effects’ sake. After the “Vivo,” “Tranquillo” grounds us with many drones underpinning more active upper voices, some of which belie the movement’s title by being abrupt and active. This is a “Tranquillo” that gives the mind freedom to wander in many directions.

The title of the fifth and final movement, “Agitato,” is initially embodied as more of an agitated mood rather than frenetic activity. If one expects a *moto perpetuo* here, that expectation is soon dispelled. This is a section of shifting moods, where agitation occurs in response to gestures that might begin calm but add angst and spark commentary that ranges from aggressive to pensive. The subsequent move to the introspective Bach D minor suite is again satisfying tonally and re-enforces the pensive and ruminating moments of the “Agitato,” within the narrower range of pitch and stylistic conventions of Bach’s era.

The final work on the CD, *Abendandacht*, 1985/2018, is the earliest Dinescu work presented, and according to the liner notes, was Deserno’s “starting point and source” for the CD project. She chose the version of the work “for trumpet or instrumental voice” from 1985. The liner notes indicate that the transferability of the “proto-composition” was thought out by the composer from its initial creation. This track emerges almost seamlessly, perhaps as an echo, after a pause, from the final note of Bach’s D minor Gigue. Marked “tranquil and melancholic,” it is at times rhapsodic, but primarily contemplative, with prominent use of augmented seconds. Accepting but not resigned, its final thoughts fade away, giving a sense of repose. This “Even-

song” reflects on the day and the complexities of life in general, and looks back calmly at the entire CD it inspired.

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## *Emergence:*

### *Emily Dickinson*

Nadine Benjamin, soprano, and Nicole Panizza, piano. Stone Records 5060192780864 (2019)

STEFANIA DE KENESSEY

“Emily Dickinson, the 19th-century recluse of Amherst, Massachusetts, is reckoned to be the poet most set to music, ever.” If this headline from *The Guardian* seems a little over the top, it is not; according to a study published by Washington State University, Dickinson’s poetry had been set to music more than 3,000 times by the year 2004. An astonishing statistic.

Soprano Nadine Benjamin and pianist Nicole Panizza make a powerful contribution to this repertoire with *Emergence: Emily Dickinson*, a collection of thirty songs by five composers, spanning three generations: Aaron Copland (b. 1900), Luigi Zanelli and Sylvia Glickman (b. 1932), Juliana Hall (b. 1958), and Ella Jarman-Pinto (b. 1969). The performers are versatile, highly accomplished, and internationally recognized, and their performances are superb. They are attentive to detail, without losing sight of the longer musical lines and dramatic arc of each song. They are sensitive to the stylistic idiosyncrasy of each composer and of each historic period. They engage in virtuoso technical display when needed, and they collaborate beautifully, bringing to life every nuance, every syllable, every note. An astonishing achievement.

Nadine Benjamin is active as an opera singer, making her 2018 debut with the English National Opera as Clara in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, and a recitalist who champions twentieth-century composers. Nicole Panizza lists her multifaceted talents as coach, vocal accompanist, and scholar; she has done extensive research

on American music and literature, with a particular emphasis on the life and works of Emily Dickinson.

The recording opens strongly, if predictably, with Copland's renowned *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Written in 1949-1950, the song cycle represents something of a departure – perhaps even a milestone – for a composer who wrote infrequently for voice and piano. The Dickinson song cycle premiered in 1950 at Columbia University in a performance by Alice Howland with the composer at the piano; unfortunately, the reception was unfavorable. History has been kinder since then, and the song cycle has finally taken its rightful place as an important contribution to an important form by an important American composer.

Stylistically, these songs turn away from the popular idiom that had made Copland's name known to the general public; we hear few echoes of the memorable, melodically and rhythmically ingratiating music that characterizes *Rodeo* or *Appalachian Spring*. But as always, Copland reveals himself to be a master craftsman who sustains the listener's interest, from start to finish, with his depth and sensitivity to matters both musical and literary. The vocal lines are intriguing, often unpredictable, offering an elegant combination of sophistication and simplicity. The piano supplies far more than mere accompaniment and engages in a regular give-and-take with the vocal line, predicting some of its flourishes, commenting on others. Above all, the songs pay meticulous attention to Dickinson's verse. Examples abound: in the first song ("When all the children sleep"), "silence everywhere" is beautifully rendered by the voice dropping into chest voice even as the piano reaches for a high, barely audible filigree figure; in the ninth song ("I felt a funeral in my brain"), the ominous rumblings in the low register of the left hand yield to sparse, accented chords that sound "like a drum"; in the tenth ("I've heard an organ talk sometimes"), we hear the church's clear triadic hymns; and in the last song, "The Chariot" (perhaps one of Dickinson's best-known poems), the voice sustains the final note of "eternity" – into eternity. Copland may be a hard act to follow, but the other composers on this disc do a marvelous job.

Luigi Zanelli is represented by "Seven Epigrams of Emily Dickinson." Each of these short songs—the longest of which lasts barely two minutes—offers some un-

anticipated felicity: the melismatic flourish on the word "delight" in the first showcases Nadine Benjamin's supple, gorgeous voice, and the repetition of the phrase "who knows" in the second deepens the sadness of a question without an answer.

Sylvia Glickman's wonderful "Black Cake: A Recipe by Emily Dickinson," originally written as an encore, was inspired by Julie Harris' one-woman show about Emily Dickinson in the 1970s. Humorously serious, Glickman infuses her highly unusual text—setting lines such as "2 teaspoons nutmeg, 5 teaspoons cloves, mace and cinnamon"—with seriously humorous intensity. Apparently, Dickinson's recipe has been tested, and the cake is "edible."

Like Glickman, Ella Jarman-Pinto is represented modestly with only one selection, but "This little rose" is beautiful, imaginative, and memorable. The song features a lilting, attractive melody, placed over a simple piano accompaniment; the main theme returns several times, and each repetition is handled deftly.

The rest of the recording is devoted to the music of Juliana Hall, and deservedly so: this gifted, incredibly productive composer has written over 50 song cycles, including another 25 Dickinson settings. "In Reverence" is one of her first compositions; harmonically and vocally, it is attractive, acerbic, angular. It calls on Nadine Benjamin's amazing technical prowess and revels in extended vocal techniques, which range from whispering and rapid textual repetition at the conclusion of "It is an honorable thought" to high-pitched squealing during the opening (and concluding) bits of "Papa above! Regard a mouse."

"A Northeast Storm," a standalone song commissioned by Lyric Fest in Philadelphia, sets an excerpt from one of Dickinson's letters, complaining about being cooped up in the parlor on account of the weather. Like the cake recipe, this is an ungainly text, but Hall rises to the challenge and makes it work, inventively quoting Chopin when "Vinnie is at the instrument."

The most recent and most important composition is *To Meet a Flower*. The three songs, taken from an earlier song cycle, are dedicated to Benjamin and were premiered by the singer at the London Festival of American Music in 2016. The songs are beautiful as music and imaginative as textual interpretation. "Whose are the little beds" has a triadic, sunny beginning, although the

music is not afraid to venture into tone cluster terrain when casting its glance on the flowers of "the blanket red." "God made a little gentian" has a striking, angular, rhythmically-compelling piano motif that it uses to great effect and with great variety, while "The daisy follows soft the sun" builds from evocative, gradually ascending chords that arise effortlessly out of the poem.

Cleverly curated and brilliantly performed by soprano Nadine Benjamin and pianist Nicole Panizza, *Emergence* is a superb addition to the growing repertoire of Dickinson songs, and it is highly recommended.

*Stefania de Konessey is the composer of Bonfire of the Vanities: The Opera, an updated and reimagined version of the novel by Tom Wolfe where both the New York Stock Exchange and American capitalism finally collapse. She is the founding president of the IAWM and a professor of music at The New School.*

### *Moto Quarto*

Trio Casals: Sylvia Ahramjian, violin; Ovidiu Marinescu, cello; Anna Kislitsyna, piano. Navona NV6237 (2018)

JAMIE CARIDI

*Moto Quarto* is the fourth in a series of recordings by the Philadelphia-based Trio Casals, and one can immediately fathom why the trio is internationally acclaimed. After debuting at the 1996 Pablo Casals Festival in Puerto Rico, the three musicians have gone on to play concerts world-wide as a trio and as individuals. The quality of both the performance and the recording is excellent, and the trio's intonation, ensemble, and musicality as well as sensitivity and expressiveness are to be commended. In this age of technological perfection, many recordings are edited to such a point that they are sterile and far from the experience of live performances. That emotional void is not the case with this recording.

Nine composers are represented, four of whom are women: Emma-Ruth Richards, Joanne D. Carey, Allyson B. Wells, and Clare Shore. Richards is a young British composer, well known in the UK and introduced to the U.S. by the Trio Casals with a work for solo cello, *Dark Radiance*. It is six minutes in length and is in memory of a friend's baby who passed away. In Greek philosophy, light is a metaphor for Truth or Goodness, darkness is Chaos or Evil. Richards is drawn to the exploration of these opposing values in her composi-