



Gregory Berg

Forgotten Liszt: Songs for Tenor and Piano. Benjamin Brecher, tenor; Robert Koenig, piano. (MSR Classics MS 1538; 67:30)

“Angiolin dal biondo crin,” “Die Lorelei,” “Le Loreley,” “Élégie,” “Quand tu chantes bercée,” “Jeanne d’Arc au bûcher,” “Wenn die letzten Sterne bleichen,” “Vergiftet sind meine Lieder,” “Die tote Nachtigall.” *Sonetto del Petrarca*: “Pace non trovo,” “Benedetto sia’l giorno,” “I’vidi in terra angelici costume.”

There was nothing forgettable about Franz Liszt. He was a veritable force of nature who dramatically reshaped almost every facet of the world of music. He was one of the most charismatic virtuosos of all time, and his solo piano recitals were the stuff of legend. He was a tireless champion and devoted mentor to many musicians, and composers such as Chopin, Berlioz, Schumann, Grieg, Glinka, Borodin, and Wagner were among his many friends. His connection to Wagner went a step further when Liszt’s daughter Cosima became Wagner’s second wife and the devoted

guardian of his legacy after his death. Liszt was a prolific writer of essays and articles on nearly every aspect of musical life in his day, and also taught piano lessons to hundreds of people over the course of his life. Above all, Liszt was a gifted and innovative composer of the Neudeutsche Schule (new German school) and was responsible for creating the world’s first symphonic tone poems, as well as for expanding the expressive palette of music in ways that directly influenced and inspired such later composers as Debussy and Ravel. Pieces like his “Bagatelle sans tonalité” (Bagatelle without tonality) clearly demonstrate Liszt’s fearless embrace of revolutionary ideas decades before they would become common staples in modern music. In short, it does Liszt a profound disservice to dismiss him as a musical celebrity and nothing more. He was a great and important composer.

Liszt composed approximately 127 art songs during his career, if one counts the many revisions he created; they span a wide array of styles and six different languages. (Not even the supremely prolific Franz Schubert can make such a boast.) They are not all masterpieces, but the vast majority are impressively crafted and tremendously effective. Sadly, even the best of Liszt’s songs are not accorded the appreciation they deserve, and many others are all but completely forgotten. The liner notes of this new recording quotes a letter written by the composer in which he says, “if a few singers could be found, not of the raw and superficial kind, who would boldly venture to sing songs by the notorious non-composer Franz Liszt, they would probably find a public for them.” Liszt wrote these sadly prophetic words in 1859.

Forgotten Liszt features twelve art songs by Liszt, and the liner notes tell us that most of them have likely not been performed since the nineteenth century; six are recorded here for the first time. If anything seems not quite to belong, it would be the three virtuosic songs that comprise his *Sonetto del Petrarca*. These have never vanished from the repertoire the way most of these other songs have, but they certainly merit much more attention and appreciation than they tend to receive. One might also wonder about the inclusion of a song like “Die Lorelei” on a recording of obscure Liszt songs. In fact, what we hear on this disk is Liszt’s original version of the song, which has been completely eclipsed by the four drastically revised versions that followed it. We are also treated to the final version of Liszt’s French variant of the song, “Le Loreley,” which was published four years before the composer’s death. Equally fascinating is the original version of “Jeanne d’Arc au bûcher,” in which Victor Hugo describes the dramatic last moments of Joan of Arc just before she is burned at the stake. Liszt was obviously and understandably taken by this vivid text and created multiple settings of it over the course of nearly thirty years. His initial setting from 1845, which is almost completely unknown, is a bolder anthem of defiance than any of the increasingly melancholy settings that came after it. Hearing these forgotten variants gives us a peek into Liszt’s restless imagination and the vast creative journeys he was willing to undertake as he sought to set great texts to the very best of his abilities. They also tend to confirm that some of Liszt’s most compelling work is heard in some of these more spontaneous and unfettered initial efforts.

Perhaps the single most fascinating piece on this disk is “Angiolin dal biondo crin,” which Liszt composed in 1839 as a lullaby for his daughter. This was almost certainly his very first art song, and this original version is almost never heard. It is brimming with attractive and interesting ideas that Liszt does not always know how to harness and connect. Moreover, the piece quickly evolves from a soothing lullaby to a scintillating bel canto showpiece that could not possibly soothe even the calmest child. Nevertheless, Liszt’s gift for understanding the human voice and writing effectively for it is clearly evident. At the time that Liszt wrote this song, he had not yet met Robert Schumann and fallen under his artistic spell as a lieder composer. One has to wonder if Liszt’s primary inspiration for this song was Beethoven’s “Adelaide.” There are intriguing parallels between the two works, including a rhapsodic freedom of expression and unbounded passion that embody what the Romantic Era was all about. Perhaps the rarest of all of these songs is “Wenn die letzten Sterne bleichen,” which Liszt composed for Count Franz Pocci in 1843. The song remained in private hands, unknown to the outside world until 1992, when the Pocci estate yielded it to the Bavarian State Library. Just over ninety seconds long, this is one of Liszt’s shortest songs, and also one of his most exquisite.

These songs receive sterling performances from tenor Benjamin Brecher, who possesses the vocal heft, sound technique, and expressive generosity that these songs demand. His sound is unfailingly lovely at every dynamic level, and he soars to even the highest climaxes with radiant ease. One cannot even think about performing the songs of Liszt without a superb

pianist as partner. Robert Koenig plays every one of these songs with stunning technical perfection and unerring stylistic instinct. Oddly enough, some of his most memorable playing comes in the disk’s last song, Liszt’s second and final setting of “Die tote Nachtigall.” In the last several years of his career, Liszt was not afraid to craft piano accompaniments that were strikingly spare in texture. Koenig plays this song with the kind of tender restraint that leaves one scarcely able to breathe, and Brecher responds in kind with some of his loveliest and most sensitive singing.

This recording could never have occurred without the work of Dr. Michael Vitalino, who brought these rarities to the attention of Brecher and Koenig and also wrote the excellent liner notes that accompany this release. Complete texts are included.

Love’s Signature: Songs for Countertenor and Soprano by Juliana Hall. Susan Narucki, soprano; Darryl Taylor, countertenor; Donald Berman, Juliana Hall, piano. (MSR Classics MS 1603; 71:00)

O Mistress Mine—12 Songs for countertenor and piano on texts from plays by William Shakespeare: “Lawn as white as driven snow,” “O happy fair!” “If love make me forsworn,” “Who is Silvia?” “O, mistress mine,” “If music be the food of love,” “Take, o take those lips away,” “Tell me where is Fancy bred,” “Come away, come away, death,” “This is a very scurvy tune to sing,” “Blow, blow, thou winter wind,” “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun.” *Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush—7 Songs for soprano and piano on letters of Emily Dickinson:* “To Eudocia C. Flynt,” “To T. W. Higginson,” “To Emily Fowler,” “To Samuel Bowles the

younger,” “To Eugenia Hall,” “To Susan Gilbert I,” “To Susan Gilbert II.” *Propriety: 5 Songs for soprano and piano on poems by Marianne Moore:* “Mercifully,” “Carnegie Hall: Rescued,” “Dream,” “Propriety,” “Melchior Vulpius.”

Juliana Hall has been one of our country’s most able and prolific art song composers for almost three decades, with more than thirty song cycles and sets to her credit. Unfortunately, there are rather few recordings of her works, which makes this new collection from MSR all the more significant and welcome. It pairs one of her most recent cycles with two works written more than a quarter century ago. One comes away from this disk with a profound appreciation for the excellence and innovation of her music as well as the hope that many more people will come to explore and enjoy it.

Ms. Hall grew up in a small Ohio town where the trappings of so-called classical music were fairly scarce. Her mother was a pianist and saw that Juliana began lessons at an early age, and there were also bountiful opportunities to experience, perform, and even compose music in the family church. The most fortuitous influence, however, may have come from her grandparents, who went out of their way to expose Juliana to the many and varied joys of folk music and poetry. She began her studies at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music as a piano major, but the work she did in a composition for performers course demonstrated her immense potential as a composer. It was during her graduate studies that she was finally persuaded to shift her academic focus from piano to composition. A yearlong artistic odyssey as a Guggenheim Fellow was the final cata-

lyst for launching what has become a full and gratifying life as a professional composer. Hall's insatiable love of language has prompted her to set the texts of poets from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Sylvia Plath.

It was during her year as a Guggenheim Fellow that Ms. Hall composed *Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush*, the earliest of the three works on this disk. While searching for poetry in the Yale University Library, she came across a three-volume set of letters penned by the legendary Emily Dickinson. Ms. Hall was already well acquainted with Dickinson's extraordinary poetry, but these letters proved to be a trove of brand new treasures that revealed every facet of the enigmatic writer's personality. Ms. Hall ultimately selected seven of these letters, and they inspire a plethora of intriguing colors and moods. For prose, Dickinson's words are surprisingly poetic and fully befitting of Hall's ingratiating music. Although all seven songs are meticulously and sensitively crafted, the singular masterpiece may be "To Eugenia Hall." The text amounts to nothing more than a brief yet heartfelt thank you note to Dickinson's twelve-year-old cousin, who had surprised her with a bouquet of flowers, but Hall's music breathes vivid life into these simple yet beautiful words. Even at this very early stage in her life and career, Hall knew something about crafting music whose beauty could enhance the text at hand without drawing attention away from that text. This is masterful writing in every respect.

Three years later, Hall composed *Propriety*, a set of five songs based on the innovative poetry of Marianna Moore, who was born during the first term of Grover Cleveland and died when Richard M. Nixon was

president. Moore was one of the most influential and revered vanguards of modernist poetry, and Hall clearly derived potent inspiration from Moore's bracingly original writing. For this particular piece, Hall gathered up texts by Moore that touched on various aspects of the world of professional music, including a fascinating poem that celebrated Isaac Stern's tireless efforts to save Carnegie Hall from the wrecking ball and another that seeks to put pretentious music critics in their place. Asymmetrical at every turn, these are the kind of texts that do not cry out for nor yield easily to musical setting, but Hall is impressively successful at capturing their peculiar charms.

The most recent work in this collection, *O Mistress Mine*, was commissioned by the highly regarded countertenor Brian Asawa. It was decided that the texts would be by William Shakespeare, and Hall credits her husband, David Sims, with choosing these particular twelve poems from ten of Shakespeare's plays. They offer up a whole universe of expressive possibilities, and Hall has composed this score with invigorating boldness and vision. The set begins with a cheerful and beguiling peddler's pitch, "Lawn as white as driven snow," that proves impossible to resist. There is also much fun to be had in a drunken song "This is a very scurvy tune to sing," complete with plenty of swooping and drooping along with at least one vocal hiccup. In the texts that have been musically set more often, Hall finds something new and compelling to say. "Come away, come away, death" has often stirred up rather histrionic music from other composers, but Hall conveys this text with a subdued bleakness that leaves the listener aching. Her setting of "Who is Silvia?" is gentler and more

hesitant than most, as though to draw attention to the question mark in the title. "O mistress mine" has a rather untidy restlessness to it that captures an aspect of this text that nearly all other composers completely miss. Her treatment of "Take, o take those lips away" captures the pain of this text better than any other composer; unlike more well known settings, this one is almost completely bereft of pleasure. Especially enchanting is "If music be the food of love," which is laced with echoes and hints of the melody Greensleeves.

Sadly, Asawa's tragic and unexpected death in the spring of 2016 prevented him from singing these songs that he had helped bring into being. The work's premiere performance later that year was dedicated to Asawa's memory as well as to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. The countertenor on that occasion was Darryl Taylor, and these songs could not have been entrusted to a more caring or expressive artist. His sound is rich and opulent and his shaping of phrase and pointing of text is exemplary. One only regrets an occasional hint of hoarseness as well as a slight bit of clumsiness in certain melodic gestures where nimble dexterity is required. The composer accompanies him here, and her considerable skills as a pianist are on grand display. The two earlier works are sung by soprano Susan Narucki, a decorated artist who has sung in more than 100 world premieres over the course of nearly three decades. She is in vocally fine fettle, especially when one considers the rigors that her voice has undergone over the course of such a busy career. She is attentive to the smallest of details, yet sings with the kind of natural freedom and openness that can truly bring a

song to life. Pianist Donald Berman, a much admired specialist in new music and the partner of one's dreams, plays superbly. The disk includes beautifully written notes by the composer, as well as full texts.

Gyorgy Sviridov: *Russia Cast Adrift*.

Dimitri Hvorostovsky, baritone; St. Petersburg State Symphony Orchestra; Style of Five Ensemble; Constantine Oberlian, conductor. (Delos DE 1631; 36:34)

"Autumn," "I Left my Home Behind," "Open Before Me," "O My Guardian Angel," "Silver Path," "Russia Cast Adrift," "Simon Peter, Where Are You? Come to Me," "Where Are you, O My Father's House?" "Beyond the Hills of the Milky Way," "It Sounds, the Fateful Trumpet," "An Owl Cries in Autumn," "Oh I Believe in Happiness," "O My Homeland, O Joyful and Eternal Hour," "The Virgin in the City."

Courage is a kind of salvation.

— PLATO

In June of 2015, the music community was stunned to learn that Siberian baritone Dimitri Hvorostovsky, one of the world's most admired and important singers, had been diagnosed with brain cancer at the age of 53. It was inconceivable that a such a vital, virile artist at the height of his powers could be struck down so capriciously, but his immediate withdrawal from all of his engagements made it clear that this was all too real. Hvorostovsky's announcement was laced with optimism and determination, but his many fans could not help but wonder whether or not his rich and compelling voice had been silenced forever.

Four months later, in defiance of all expectations, Hvorostovsky performed the taxing role of Count di Luna in Verdi's *Il trovatore* on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. He delivered three powerful and impassioned performances that had audiences cheering themselves into hoarseness. (In an unprecedented gesture of affection and admiration, the members of the Met orchestra threw dozens of white lilies on to the stage as the baritone took a special solo bow during the curtain calls. It was very clear that everyone associated with the Met was thrilled and amazed by what they had witnessed.) Alas, these three performances were but a brief hiatus from the brutally intense regimen of treatment that forced the cancellation of nearly all of his other operatic and concert engagements.

In December of 2016, the baritone announced that his compromised sense of balance was forcing him to cancel all of his staged operatic performances "for the foreseeable future" and limit himself to infrequent concert appearances. Two particularly emotional occasions since then stand out. One occurred in May of 2017 at the star-studded gala concert celebrating the Metropolitan Opera's fifty seasons at Lincoln Center. Nobody present on that memorable night will ever forget when general manager Peter Gelb told the audience that they were about to hear from a beloved artist who was making a surprise appearance "in defiance of the odds and the gods." That artist, of course, was Dimitri Hvorostovsky, and the sight of him walking with cautious, labored gait on to that stage only underscored the courage and determination he had demonstrated in simply being there. He proceeded to deliver a thundering and impassioned performance of

"Cortigiani" from Verdi's *Rigoletto* that was easily the emotional and musical high point of the evening, if not the entire season. The other emotional highlight came in June when Hvorostovsky made the long journey to his Siberian hometown of Krasnoyarsk to sing with the city's orchestra and to receive a special award as an Honored Citizen of the region. The baritone had injured one of his shoulders in a bad fall not long before, but not even an arm in a sling would keep him away from this triumphant and poignant homecoming.

One of the pieces he sang on that concert was a movement from *Russia Cast Adrift*, a lush and highly emotional work by neo-romantic composer Gyorgy Sviridov (1915–1998), for whose music Hvorostovsky has long been an ardent champion. Sviridov was quite exacting when it came to how his works were performed, but he took an immediate liking to the young baritone and to the way he sang his music when they first met in 1994. Two years later, he recorded *Russia Cast Adrift* with pianist Michail Arkadiev. The work became a central staple on the baritone's recitals, along with a later work, *Petersburg*, that Sviridov wrote especially for him. "At first glance," says Hvorostovsky, "his songs seem simple. However, they demand the deepest emotional involvement. The music colors each word with pain and unspeakable purity. It tortures you emotionally."

Thirteen months after his cancer diagnosis, Hvorostovsky returned to the recording studio to make a new recording of *Russia Cast Adrift* in an orchestration by Evgeny Stetsyuk. Sviridov had repeatedly expressed interest in orchestrating the piece but never got around to doing it, so this recording brings his wishes to fruition

while also providing the baritone with the opportunity to pay tribute once again to his treasured mentor and friend. The texts are from the pen of Sergei Yesenin (1895–1925), a brilliant but troubled poet whose four wives included renowned dancer Isadora Duncan, as well as Leo Tolstoy's granddaughter Sophie. All of the poems chosen by Sviridov for this piece were written between 1914 and 1920, one of the most turbulent periods in recent Russian history. Collectively, they convey a remarkably rich portrait of the nation of Russia, its people, and all that they have endured.

It is always dicey for a singer to risk direct comparison with a recording of the same music made twenty years earlier, but this is a case where the

risk was well worth it. Hvorostovsky's sound is still astonishingly rich and beautiful, complete with several high A-flats that leave the listener staggered and amazed. His breath control and ability to sculpt long melodic lines are still beyond reproach, and his expressive abilities are deeper than they have ever been. The only real concession to time is in a certain loss of easy sheen and gleam in the sound in favor of a darker and slightly more effortful production. Nevertheless, when one considers all that he has been through, this performance is nothing less than an astounding triumph. The orchestration deftly combines the majestic sonority of full orchestra with the distinctive colors of a small ensemble of Russian folk instruments. There are fleeting

moments when one might prefer the cleaner clarity of the original version for piano, but overall the effect is mesmerizing and fully convincing. As a bonus, we are given one movement from the aforementioned *Petersburg*, which, as earlier mentioned, was written especially for Hvorostovsky, and he sings it magnificently. Constantine Orbelian offers assured and sensitive leadership from the podium.

If this is the last recording Hvorostovsky is able to make, it will serve as a perfect summation of a magnificent career. One fervently wishes, however, that this treasureable artist will have the opportunity to sing for many years to come. That would be a great blessing indeed, both for him and for all of us who love him.

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