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MAKING SWEET MUSIC TOGETHER: ENSEMBLE SINGING FOR DUETS, TRIOS, AND QUARTETS

One of the great pleasures in the life of a singing artist is the experience of collaboration, whether it be with a pianist, a chamber ensemble, or an orchestra, or the unmatched experience of joining voices with other singers. There is an abundance of art song available for two or more singers, thanks most recently in part to contemporary ensembles who have chosen to commission works from living composers, and thanks also to gems from past masters. Two of the vocal quartets examined in this month's review are results of commissions by the Mirror Visions Ensemble, comprised of soprano Tobé Malawista, tenor Scott Murphree, and baritone Richard Lalli, responsible for the creation of over sixty-nine new works. Their recordings and concerts have earned accolades from the *New York Times*, *Opera News*, and *New Yorker* magazine, and have brought exciting new repertoire to the fore.

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Platt, Russell (b. 1965). **Four Trios from *From Noon to Starry Night: A Walt Whitman Cantata*, for Soprano, Baritone and Tenor.** “A Clear Midnight”/“Salut au Monde” (Part I)/“Twilight”/“A Sketch.” Fort Tryon Press, Classical Vocal Reprints, 2006.

Russell Platt is a composer, reviewer, and essayist. He has received awards for his significant contributions as a writer to such literary institutions as *The New Yorker's* “Goings on about Town” and *Opera News*. In *From Noon to Starry Night*, Platt has chosen texts by one of America's most lauded poets, Walt Whitman, effectively conveying the “noon and starry night,” the beginning and end of a notable life of a notable poet. The recording made by Mirror Visions describes the texts chosen for the cantata as highlighting “the roughneck Whitman, the democratic Whitman, the transcendentalist Whitman, Whitman the ‘lover of comrades,’ and Whitman the bard of war.” Fort Tryon Press now has published a number of solos from the cantata (available through Classical Vocal Reprints) and these four excerpted trios. “A Clear Midnight,” the first and the shortest piece of the four, begins with an *a cappella* setting for all three voices together, alternating with moody solo *pianissimo* triplet figures for solo piano. Platt uses an interesting device for the tenor voice, giving it a line to be sung freely and with *rubato* against the other two voices, which sing the same text in strict time, finally uniting for “night, sleep, death, and the stars.” “Salut au Monde” is a jaunty *valse américaine*, and “Twilight” is a slow and elegiac comparison between day's end and

the end of life. “A Sketch” (1842) is the longest of the four trios. It uses four of the five stanzas of Whitman's original poem, and delays the entrance of the third voice, the soprano, until the third stanza, for “oh, thou bless'd Spirit,” as the poet addresses his dead love. Platt frames this extraordinary poetry with remarkable transparency and clarity, using a complex harmonic underpinning that often resolves in a startling return to a clear and pure tonality. The vocal arrangements are metrically complex, and the harmonies close enough to require superb musical skills on the part of the singers.

In addition to the trios, the cantata's solos, “The Dying Veteran,” “Two Whitman Panels” (“When I heard at the Close of the Day,” and “I saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing”), “The Dying Veteran,” and “Paumanok” are also available through Classical Vocal Reprints.

Berg, Christopher (b. 1965). ***Cantata: Portrait en miniature de Madame de Sévigné (1626–1696)***, pour soprano, tenor, barytone et piano. “Prelude” (trio)/“Une comète” (tenor)/ “Chi offende, non perdona” (soprano)/ “. . . la plus étonnante . . .” (trio sans piano)/ “La grande amitié” (duo soprano, tenor)/ “A Paris, ce vendredi” (baryton)/ “Les gourmandises” (duo soprano, tenor)/ “. . . mais parlons d'autre chose” (duo soprano, tenor). Tender Tender Music, New York/ Classical Vocal Reprints, 2002.

Like his mentor Richard Hundley, self-taught American composer Christopher Berg is known primarily for his achievements in the area of art song. In addition to the cantata *Madame de Sévigné*, Berg has completed other commissions

from Mirror Visions, including these pieces for vocal trio: *Incomincian* (Dante), *Le Bijoux* (Baudelaire), *Letter from Richard* (Richard Hundley), *Trois évantails* (Mallarme), and *Les Mouches* (Benjamin Franklin). *Portrait en miniature de Madame de Sévigné* is included on the recording *Un Américain à Paris*, on the Albany label. The songs are distinctly French in feel, with an exquisite attention to the prosody of these letters from the seventeenth century woman of letters, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné. Composer Berg, student of noted piano pedagogue and composer Robert Helps, has here created challenging and beautiful piano accompaniments for seven of the eight songs. His setting of the French texts are masterful, and convey just the right amount of *souciance* required for each. He has been compared to Poulenc but the songs are also reminiscent of Enescu's *Sept Chansons de Clément Marot*. Each voice has been given one solo song, in addition to the duets and trios.

The "Prélude . . . à l'hotel de Carnavalet" is an affectionate address to Madame de Sévigné's daughter, and is a brief unaccompanied homophonic introduction for the three voices, with the piano's entrance delayed until the final word, "vous." The piece proceeds immediately to "Une comète" (A comet), a lyric tenor solo about the Great Comet of 1680, and all it portended for Madame's earthly acquaintances. "Chi offense" (Who offends, does not forgive) is a droll and chatty vehicle for the soprano. ". . . la plus étonnante . . ." (. . . the most amazing . . .) is another unaccompanied trio, with exceptional demands in terms of tuning amidst frequent key changes. Berg employs vocal coloring by means of glissandi and some *Sprechstimme*. "La grand amité" is another affection-

ate if disconsolate letter to Madame's daughter, set with affecting compositional attention to the writer's mental wanderings and *ennui*. The solo "A Paris, ce vendredi" (To Paris, this Friday) for baritone is speech driven rather than lyric, yet vocally gratifying. The sixth song, "Les gourmandizes" (Sweets), is an entertaining duet for soprano and tenor, and, like much of the cycle, illustrates the composer's mastery of the nuances of the French language, as he lists the many culinary delights of contemporary French culture. The final song, ". . . mais parsons d'autre chose . . ." (. . . but we speak of other things . . .) is a beautiful, stately musing for two voices as Madam de Sévigné's writes again to her beloved daughter, this time about the vicissitudes of life and death. The soprano muses, while the tenor sings a wordless lament.

Berg's songs are a perfect vehicle for an ensemble of musically savvy singers who can masterfully communicate the subtleties of these French text settings.

Hall, Juliana (b. 1958). ***Fables for a Prince: Six Songs for Soprano, Mezzo Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, and Piano on Fables by Jean de La Fontaine, with English translations by Marianne Moore.*** "To His Royal Highness the Dauphin"/"The Fox and His Crow"/"The Hen that Laid the Golden Eggs"/"The Horse and his Ass"/"The Physicians"/"Epilogue." Juliana Hall Music/ Classical Vocal Reprints, 1990.

These delightful songs by prolific American composer Juliana Hall are settings of texts by Fontaine, a seventeenth century writer of free verse fables and literary criticism. Each of the six songs employs all four singers

in their telling of various pithy and ironic stories. The texts and their moral lessons are at times convoluted and complex, and not easy to assimilate, and so require superb story-telling skills on the part of the performers.

Tonally speaking, the songs are straightforward, albeit with frequent harmonic shifts. The tessitura for each solo voice is solidly mid-range, with the part writing for voices and piano largely homophonic. *Fables* is not a vehicle for bravura performances by each soloist, but is really a set of moral stories told together by the quartet. The melodic lines are mostly scalar, with very little in the way of leaps, yet challenging nonetheless, as the harmonies shift unexpectedly.

Ms. Hall has other intriguing offerings for vocal ensembles, including *Music Like a Curve of Gold* (poems of Sara Teasdale), and *Roosters* (poems of Elizabeth Bishop).

Gianopoulos, George N. ***Thirteen Haiku for Singers and Piano, Op. 27, texts by Jack Kerouac (1922–1969).***

"Leaf Dropping Straight"/"Swinging on Delicate Hinges"/"Tonight That Star"/"Gray Orb of the Moon"/"Racing Westward"/"Quietly Pouring Coffee"/"The Bird Came on the Branch"/"The Raindrops have Plenty of Personality"/"White Clouds of this Steamy Planet"/"Reflected Upside Down"/"Coming from the West"/"Drunk as a Hoot Owl"/"Walking with Me." Self-published.

Gianopoulos describes these as "songs of introspection and self-reflection, wit and sardonic humor, loneliness, nostalgia, and absurdity set to jazz-fused ballads, tongue-in-cheek operatic arias, tin pan alley tunes, chromatic mysticism and subtle sentiment.