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Bold Beauty: Songs by Juliana Hall.

Molly Fillmore, soprano; Elvia Pucinelli, piano. (Blue Griffin Recordings BGR 559; 61:00)

Letters from Edna: “To Mr. Ficke and Mr. Bynner,” “To Arthur Davison Ficke—1913,” “To Anne Gardner Lynch,” “To Harriet Monroe,” “To Norma Millay,” “To Arthur Davison Ficke—1943,” “To Arthur Davison Ficke—1930,” “To Mother.” *Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush*: “To Eudocia C. Flynt,” “To T.W. Higginson,” “To Emily Fowler (Ford),” “To Samuel Bowles the Younger,” “To Eugenia Hall,” “To Susan Gilbert (Dickinson) I,” “To Susan Gilbert (Dickinson) II.” *Theme in Yellow*: “Song,” “Ripe Corn,” “November,” “Theme in Yellow,” “Splinter,” “Haze Gold.” *Cameos*: “Sarah Albritton,” “Kay WalkingStick,” “Nellie Mae Rowe,” “Alice Dalton Brown,” “Agnes Pelton,” “Corita Kent.”

There is more than one pathway to greatness. It is sometimes achieved through unstinting focus on a specific

goal from the moment one begins harboring professional or vocational aspirations of any kind. But greatness can also be achieved once someone has relinquished one goal in favor of another. That change in course can be disconcerting, to say the least, but any success that follows is exceptionally sweet.

Juliana Hall has scored incredible success in the realm of art song, despite being something of a late bloomer as a composer. The daughter of a gifted pianist, Hall devoted many years to piano study and achieved a high degree of excellence. It was only while pursuing a graduate degree in piano at Yale School of Music that she found herself drawn toward and directed into composition. She had dabbled in composition from time to time, as so many gifted musicians do, and had always had interest in poetry and theater, but this was the point in her life when composition became the primary focus of her considerable talents and energy. As if to confirm the wisdom of her bold choice, Hall earned a master's degree in composition and within months was hard at work on her first commission—a song cycle for soprano Dawn Upshaw. From that auspicious start, Hall has gone on to craft highly regarded works for some of the world's most esteemed singers, including Stephanie Blythe, Anthony Dean Griffey, and Brian Asawa. She remains one of the world's most prolific and lauded art song composers, with her creative energies burning as brightly as ever.

The release *Bold Beauty* is a marvelous collection that combines three early song sets (from 1989, 1990, and 1993) with a more recent one composed in 2018. Every measure of music recorded here is a clear demonstration

of Hall's exceptional abilities for taking almost any kind of text and giving it new life through music. Two of these four song collections are actually settings of letters rather than poems, but Hall does not seem the least troubled by the challenge of setting nonpoetic texts to music. On the contrary, she seems to relish the challenge, because it seems to draw especially vivid music from her pen. Of course, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Emily Dickinson are not exactly typical letter writers, and one can certainly sense their poetic voice lurking just beneath the surface. *Letters from Edna* consists of songs that are every bit as colorful and vivid as the poet herself. There is an almost jaunty joy in these letters, no matter what the circumstances under which they were written; one can sense Millay's intense love of language in the way she puts words together. There is a very different mood at play in *Syllables of Velvet, Sentences of Plush*, which are settings of letters by the fascinating and enigmatic Emily Dickinson. Although there are certainly dashes of humor and irreverence, there is also more an atmosphere of mystery overhanging these songs.

Hall turns to more conventional texts for her beautifully crafted *Theme in Yellow*, which draws upon poetry by Edna St. Vincent Millay and Carl Sandburg, among others. She tells us in the liner notes that, earlier in her career, her typical practice was to choose a theme for a given song cycle or set and then search for poems that would align with that theme. That is what she did in this case, and the result was nothing less than a small masterpiece. “Song” is especially exquisite, but each of these songs fits into the context of the others, like colorful tile fragments in an intricate mosaic.

Perhaps the most striking surprise in this collection is also the most recently composed. *Cameos*, from 2018, is a set of six songs set to poems by Molly Fillmore, the gifted soprano whose fine singing is featured on this disk. (See also “Music Reviews,” pp. 539–540.) The set is meant to be a tribute to past American female artists whose excellent work deserves far greater recognition.

One might be forgiven for assuming the worst about such a project, but in fact Fillmore’s poems are sophisticated and expertly crafted, and Hall reciprocates with some of her most imaginatively conceived music.

Fillmore supplies vibrant and exciting singing through all four of these works. Hers is a big, gleaming sound that is richly laden with colors. One might only lament the intrusiveness of vibrato in those moments when a gentler simplicity of tone is called for. Among her finest attributes is a startling clarity of diction, which helps the listener make sense of even the most complex of these texts. Of

course, Hall herself deserves credit for setting these lyrics so effectively. Collaborative pianist Elvia Puccinelli completes the picture with her superb and sensitive playing.

The booklet includes a wonderful essay about Hall and her career, as well as fascinating liner notes about all the repertoire presented here. This is a first class recording in every respect and is highly recommended.

Margaret Bonds: The Ballad of the Brown King & Selected Songs.

Lacquinta Mitchell, soprano; Lucia Bradford, mezzo soprano; Noah Stewart, tenor; Malcolm J. Merriweather, baritone; Ashley Jackson, harp; The Dessoff Choirs and Orchestra; Malcolm J. Merriweather, conductor. (Dessoff Choirs AV 2431; 35:16)

The Ballad of the Brown King: “Of the Three Wise Men,” “They Brought Fine Gifts,” “Sing Alleluia,” “Mary Had a Little Baby,” “Now

When Jesus Was Born,” “Could He Have Been an Ethiope?,” “Oh, Sing of the King who was Tall and Brown,” “That was a Christmas Long Ago,” “Alleluia.” *The Dream Portraits:* “Minstrel Man,” “Dream Variation,” “I, Too.” “To a Brown Girl Dead.” “Winter Moon.”

Whenever composer Terence Blanchard has been asked about being the first Black composer to have a work performed at the Metropolitan Opera, he has consistently stated that there were a host of others who were every bit as deserving of such an honor. His gracious and heartfelt acknowledgment of those who have come before him has inspired new exploration of his many predecessors, including African American composers with prodigious gifts who deserve far more recognition. One such composer is Margaret Bonds (1913–1972), a brilliantly talented composer and concert pianist who also managed to be a wife, mother, and community activist. Born in Chicago and educated at Northwestern University, Bonds earned headlines in 1933 when she became the first Black concert pianist to perform with a major symphony orchestra. That historic performance with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra should have opened a plethora of professional doors for Bonds, but frustratingly few performance opportunities came her way. By 1939, she had relocated to Harlem, where she would remain a cultural fixture for the next three decades. It was there that she began collaborating with writer Langston Hughes on an array of important and deeply meaningful projects. Ashley Jackson’s liner notes for *Margaret Bonds: The Ballad of the Brown King & Selected Songs* tell us that “Bonds

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