



JOURNAL OF SINGING

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL
OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF TEACHERS OF SINGING, INC.





Gregory Berg

Living in the Body: Songs of Lori

Laitman. Jennifer Check, Ashley Emerson, Sari Gruber, Alisa Jordheim, Maureen McKay, soprano; Margaret Gawrysiak, mezzo soprano; Darryl Taylor, countertenor; Dominic Armstrong, Vale Rideout, tenor; Randall Scarlata, baritone; Thomas Kraines, cello; Gary Louie, alto saxophone; Emily Skala, flute; Warren Jones, Lori Laitman, Andrew Rosenblum, Kirsten Taylor, piano. (Naxos 8.559872-73; 74:47)

“And I Will Bring Them,” “Todesfuge,” “’Tis Philosophy,” “Dear Future Roommate,” “What You Wanted,” “I Am In Need of Music,” “Journey,” “The Act,” “The Silver Swan,” “On a Photograph,” “Lullaby,” “You Leave Me Bent.” *The Joy of Uncreating*: “Illumination,” “The Joy of Uncreating.” *The Blood Jet*: “Morning Song,” “Rival,” “Kindness,” “Balloons.” *Sable Pride*: “A Brown Girl Dead,” “Incident,” “Tableau.” *Two William Carlos Williams Songs*: “Full Moon,” “Light Hearted William.” *Living in the Body*: “Burn-

ing the Woods of my Childhood,” “Living in the Body,” “Not for Burning,” “Lost at Table,” “Bring on the Rain,” “Crossroads.” *Five Lovers*: “On Meeting Again,” “Lovely in the Bones,” “The Morning,” “Second Date,” “July 95 Degrees.” *On the Green Trail*: “On the Green Trail,” “Looking at My Hands,” “Small Night Song from Oneonta.” *Rivers of Horses*: “My Hand Forever,” “A Blessing,” “A Birth,” “The War God’s Horse Song,” “Two Horses Playing in the Orchard.” *The Soul Fox*: “The Man Who Lied,” “Sarong Song,” “Aubade,” “Night Song,” “The Soul Fox.” *Short Songs for Edward*: “Avo-cado and Goat Tree,” “When You Have to Make a Poo,” “Sometimes You Get A Boo-Boo,” “Please and Thank You.”

Lori Laitman is one of America’s most prolific, accomplished, and admired art song composers, but the informal biography on her website tells the astonishing story of how she might not have ever entered the arena of art song in the first place were it not for the relentless insistence of soprano Lauren Wagner, her good friend and former roommate. In 1991, Wagner won a Concert Artists Guild competition that would give her the opportunity to make her first professional recording. Wagner reached out to Laitman, her friend since their days at Interlochen, and begged her to compose something that Wagner could sing for her debut CD. At this point, Laitman was strictly a composer of instrumental music with no idea how one went about composing a serious art song. Anxious not to disappoint her friend, Laitman began looking through books of poetry in search of a text that might inspire her. Before long, she found herself drawn

to the work of Sara Teasdale, and by the end of the year Laitman had set Teasdale’s “The Metropolitan Tower” to music. Amazingly, Laitman’s very first art song was nothing less than a masterpiece, and it was just the spark of what would become a truly glorious career. Almost three decades and more than three hundred songs later, Laitman’s creative flame shows no signs of flickering. Whether in the intimate context of art song or on the more expansive canvas of opera, Lori Laitman continues to create vocal music of the very highest standard. Thank goodness for the determined friend who would not take no for an answer.

This two-disk set from Naxos, part of their highly regarded series called American Classics, is the result of several years of tireless and diligent work by Laitman to create recordings of her songs that had not yet been committed to disk. As if this weren’t already a formidable undertaking, she was also determined to rerecord those songs that had been revised since receiving their initial recordings. Thus, every one of the more than fifty pieces contained on these disks is either a world premiere recording or in some way a new recording. They span twenty years of her career and represent a dizzying array of colors, moods, and textures. Needless to say, a project of these dimensions does not come together easily nor quickly. The actual recording sessions back in 2017 were followed by months of editing, ordering of tracks, and crafting of program notes. The result of all this work is a monument to excellence and a potent reminder of the mysterious magic that occurs when poetry and music are combined with such mastery and such love.

This release is powerfully moving even before one has listened to a single

measure of the remarkable music it contains. The program notes, lovingly crafted by the composer herself, testify to the rich web of relationships that are the very essence of a career like Laitman's. Every one of these works sprang from someone's desire for a new piece of music to enter the world. In some cases, it was a commission to honor someone's memory or to support an important cause. In other cases, it was a gifted singer in search of something new and exciting for them to perform. Some of the stories shared in these program notes are of projects that fell dormant for one reason or another, only to be revived down the road and given new life. In one instance, it was a misunderstanding with a poet that caused access to a particular poem to be withdrawn, but which led the original song to be re-conceived as a poignant instrumental piece for saxophone and piano titled "Journey." The stories behind many of these works speak to the unpredictable nature of the creative life where carefully laid plans are sometimes discarded in favor of the reinvigoration of new possibilities.

Sadly, there is no way to chronicle all of the musical glories to be found in these two disks, but several overarching themes are paramount. One is Laitman's uncanny ability to enhance the intrinsic qualities of every text she sets to music. From the pungent verse of Sylvia Plath to the sweeping beauty of a verse from Isaiah, Laitman's music always draws us deeper into the text at hand. Another of her most important qualities is an unerring understanding of how the human singing voice operates and what kind of melodic lines bring out the best in voices. Laitman may have begun her musical life as a flutist, but she has a singer's heart and a singer's ear. She

also knows how to craft music that will perfectly suit a particular voice. One of the clearest indications of that comes early on the first disk when we move from *The Blood Jet*, written for the gleaming soprano of Sari Gruber, to *Sable Pride*, which was composed for warmer, duskier sound of countertenor Darryl Taylor.

Again and again on these disks, we experience the perfect matching of music to voice. But the songs of Lori Laitman are about much more than what the singer gets to sing. Her piano accompaniments are exquisitely crafted in a way that makes them more than mere accompaniments while always supportive of the singer. Incidentally, one of the four fine pianists who are heard here to such great advantage is Andrew Rosenblum, who is one of the composer's sons. But Laitman does not limit herself to the customary pairing of piano and voice. *Living in the Body*, which gives this release its title, is a setting of six poems by Joyce Sutphen that combines soprano voice with saxophone in a manner that sounds exactly right. This is one of several instances in which instruments other than piano are used to telling effect. It is also important to acknowledge the thematic range that this collection represents. We experience everything from the horrors of the Holocaust to the comic tedium of a second date. The world of poetry can take us anywhere, and when the words are set to just the right music, the journey becomes even more vivid.

Laitman shares helpful background information on every single work, and biographies are included of every musical participant. Full texts are available in an online supplement. This release is a treasure trove both for fans of the composer as well as for

those who are discovering the riches of her work for the first time.

Emergence: Emily Dickinson.

Nadine Benjamin, soprano; Nicole Panizza, piano. (Stone Records 5060192780864; 78:50)

Aaron Copland: *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*: "Nature, the Gentlest Mother," "There came a wind like a bugle," "Why do they shut me out of Heaven?," "The world feels dusty," "Heart, we will forget him," "Dear March, come in," "Sleep is supposed to be," "When they come back," "I felt a funeral in my brain," "I've heard an organ talk sometimes," "Going to Heaven!," "The Chariot." Luigi Zaninelli: *Seven Epigrams of Emily Dickinson*: "Had I pleasure you had not," "Who knows where our hearts go," "I trust this sweet May Morning," "We wouldn't mind the sun dear," "I am studying music now," "Till it has loved," "You might not know I remembered you." Juliana Hall: *To Meet a Flower*: "Whose are those little beds, I asked," "God made a little gentian," "The daisy follows soft the sun." "A Northeast Storm." *In Reverence*: "It is an honorable Thought," "Lightly stepped a yellow star," "Prayer is the little implement," "Papa above!" "The grace my little cottage is." Sylvia Glickman: "Black Cake: A Recipe by Emily Dickinson." Ella Jarman-Pinto: "This Little Rose."

In the pantheon of great poets, Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) occupies an especially hallowed place. She was a spectacularly gifted writer and a daring innovator, but there is also something of a veil of mystery surrounding who she was and from

what sort of life experience her work emerged. One reason she is such an enigmatic figure is that during her lifetime her work was only known to her closest family and friends. Only seven of her 1,775 poems were published while she was alive, and even those were published without her permission. Fame came years after her death when her poems first began to gain wider circulation amongst the public. With that fame came endless questions—and endless speculation—about how such a genius could go unrecognized and why she was so seemingly reluctant to share her gifts with the wider world. It is little wonder that Dickinson is perhaps the most misunderstood of all American writers of the nineteenth century and a figure who continues to fascinate us across the years.

Dickinson's poetry has drawn the attention of a whole host of composers, and this new disk from Stone Records combines Aaron Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, by far the best known of all Dickinson song settings, with comparably compelling songs by Luigi Zaninelli, Juliana Hall, Sylvia Glickman, and Ella Jarman-Pinto. It is an intriguing concept that is executed with great success, thanks to the marvelous performances contained herein. British soprano Nadine Benjamin possesses a voice of luscious radiance that she unfurls with both generosity and grace. Pianist Nicole Panizza is her equal partner in every respect, playing even the most intimidating of these pieces with disarming ease. Her biography indicates that Panizza has made Dickinson songs one of her professional specialties, and it shows in the stylistic assurance of her playing.

This new recording of the Copland is a honorable successor to the fine

recordings that have preceded it, particularly in terms of naturalness, musicality, and perfect clarity of text. One might wish for a more exuberant sense of playfulness in songs like "Going to Heaven" and "Why do they shut me out of heaven?," but in the songs calling for beauty and wistfulness, Benjamin and Panizza achieve near perfection. The other works on this disk are fascinating additions to the repertoire. Luigi Zaninelli, a prolific composer with more than 300 works to his credit, is best known for his colorful arrangements of folk songs and gospel songs. His *Seven Epigrams of Emily Dickinson* represents a rather flamboyant approach to these brief and intriguing texts, which sets them in striking contrast to the Copland songs. It is often difficult to discern the words, but that is more the fault of the composer than of the singer. Nevertheless, these songs crackle with theatrical intensity.

Juliana Hall is one of the most able composers before the public today, and her contributions to the *oeuvre* of Dickinson songs are especially valuable. *To Meet a Flower* is a setting of three poems that beautifully reflect the poet's ardent love of gardening and the way in which the natural world inspired her on so many occasions. "A Northeast Storm" is a free standing song that is actually a setting of excerpts from a breezy, somewhat whimsical letter that Dickinson wrote to her brother Austin in which she describes an evening storm and her family's reaction to it. It is in this song that Hall demonstrates her exceptional gift for finding the essential heart of a text. *In Reverence*, the program notes tell us, is Hall's very first published work and dates from more than thirty years ago. Composed as a wedding present for a friend from Yale, the work is

remarkably assured for someone who had just begun serious composition. There is a world of stylistic range in these five poems, and Hall seems to know exactly what to do to bring these texts to life. The disk finishes with two songs that strike out in very different directions. Sylvia Glickman's "Black Cake" is a setting of an Emily Dickinson recipe that begins seriously but ends light heartedly, and the composer injects all sorts of fun twists into her setting. The biggest surprise of the disk is Ella Jarman-Pinto's setting of "This Little Rose," which has been set in gentle fashion by a number of composers. This setting has a suggestive sort of swing to that owes something to the worlds of jazz and blues. It is the last thing one would expect, but it works wonderfully.

Liner notes include a thorough essay about Emily Dickinson and her poetry, as well as biographies of the composers whose songs comprise this collection. There are introductions to each set of songs as well, and complete texts are included. This release is highly recommended.

Maria by Callas. (Sony B07MP-K2XZP; 1:53:00)

Maria Callas remains a figure of endless fascination and controversy. Her career was relatively brief yet exceptionally complicated, and there has probably never been a singer more widely misunderstood. Even now, with the benefit of hindsight, we still grapple with the mystery of who she was and what was most key to her artistic distinctiveness. No other singer has been the subject of so many articles, books, and films as Callas, and the public's fervent interest shows no sign of abating any time soon.