



Gregory Berg

***The Sun is Love: Song Cycles and Piano Music by Gwyneth Walker.***

Michaëlle Areyza, soprano; Jamie Shaak, piano. (Proteus 0015; 51:48)

"Rhythms of the North Country"; "Semplice"; *Though Love Be A Day*: "Thy fingers make early flowers," "lily has a rose," "after all white horses are in bed," "maggie and milly and molly and may," "Still"; *Mornings Innocent*: "Women Should Be Pedestals," "In Autumn," "I Will Be Earth"; *The Sun is Love*: "Circling the Sun," "Quietness," "Flirtation," "The Sunrise Ruby," "Dualities," "A Waterbird (Flying into the Sun)."

One of the highlights of the 2016 NATS conference in Chicago was a publisher showcase performance titled "Songs of Love and Adventure: The Vocal Music of Gwyneth Walker." It was a brilliant and moving celebration of one of our most accomplished and beloved contemporary composers. What made it even more exciting is the fact that Dr. Walker herself was present to hear these beautiful performances of her work and to receive the accolades of all who were present. It

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was clear confirmation that she holds a very special place in the hearts of all who love contemporary art song.

Gwyneth Walker left a promising career in academia in the early 1980s when she realized that her responsibilities as a music professor at Oberlin were diverting too much of her time and energy away from composition. With firm resolve, she returned to her native Vermont and lived for the next several decades on a dairy farm, where both the lifestyle and landscape allowed her to flourish as a composer in truly spectacular fashion. Dr. Walker approaches her 70th birthday with well over 300 compositions to her credit, including rapturously received choral works, art songs, chamber pieces, and orchestral literature. She has approached her career in very pragmatic fashion and built an impressive network of ensembles and organizations that are eager to perform her works and commission new ones. It is a matter beyond the high quality of her music; she is also a consummate professional who views every opportunity to create a new composition as a priceless opportunity for which she is profoundly grateful. Undoubtedly, she would attribute her exceptional work ethic and humble graciousness to her Quaker background and to the wider community of musicians of which she is glad to be a part.

The disk at hand is a collection of three Gwyneth Walker song cycles, and all three vividly demonstrate her superb instincts for igniting the full potential of a given text. There is something both musically and emotionally lavish about her songs, a sense that the composer has drawn deeply from an inexhaustible well of ideas and inspiration. This is especially true of *Though Love Be A Day*, which features

four poems by E.E.Cummings, plus a remarkable poem of her own. Walker composed this set in 1979 while she was on the faculty at Oberlin; it was written for a student at the time named Kathryn Bennett. The composer pivots gracefully between the impassioned ardor of "Thy fingers make early flowers," the frolicking fun of "lily has a rose," the exquisite poise of "after all white horses are in bed," and the saucy attitude of "maggie and milly and molly and may." She not only embraces and expresses the emotional heart of each of these disparate texts, but also manages to create an indelible line of continuity between them. These are four distinct songs rendered by a single voice capable of expressing a limitless array of emotions and moods. "Still" draws the set to a gorgeous and satisfying conclusion. Clearly, Walker is a composer who not only creates wonderful songs but also knows exactly how to tie them together in just the right combination and order.

The story behind *Mornings Innocent*, a setting of four poems by May Swenson, demonstrates how luck is sometimes necessary to draw artists from different worlds together. In this case, Walker knew nothing of Swenson or her writing until she happened to come across her obituary in the *New York Times*. Walker was so intrigued by the brief examples of her poetry contained in the article that she actually took it upon herself to travel to New York City for Swenson's memorial service, where she had the opportunity to hear still more of her work. She ultimately secured permission from Swenson's estate to set these four texts to music, and they turned out to be the foundation for an enchanting song cycle that Walker composed in 1993. "Women Should Be Pedestals"

parades one outrageous and outmoded notion after another of the supposedly “proper” role of women in relation to men. It is Walker’s charming music that makes us smile rather than cringe. The three subsequent songs are all more serious and lyric in nature, and each one is breathtakingly beautiful in its own way. One should take note of how she repeats certain words and phrases in “I Will Be Earth” in a way that extracts deeper meaning from the poem without tampering with its essence. Only a composer with a keen poetic sense is likely to manage such a feat so sensitively and effectively.

The disk concludes with *The Sun is Love*, which is based on six poems by Jelaluddin Rumi as translated into English by Coleman Barks. Walker clearly finds deep resonance with these texts that originated in the 13th century. In her own commentary, she refers to this particular cycle as “a flowing set of songs intended to be presented as a whole.” There is a seamlessness to this set that is quite captivating, as though almost nothing divides these songs from one another. It creates a palpable sensation of embarking on a powerful emotional journey through the heart of what it means to love and be loved. This may be the most technically demanding of the three cycles, for both singer and pianist, but those technical challenges never draw undue attention to themselves. They seem instead like an entirely inevitable expression of the deeply layered passion of these texts. By the time we reach the soaring climax of “A Waterbird,” with the singer almost desperately singing “what I want” over and over again, we are thoroughly exhausted in the best sense of the word!

Soprano Michelle Areyzaga and pianist Jamie Shaak deliver perfor-

mances of stunning beauty, clarity, and eloquence. Ms. Areyzaga’s voice has a luminous radiance from top to bottom, and she deploys that sound with elegant ease in even the most taxing of these songs. Beyond the exquisite sound she produces, the soprano also has a limitless palette of emotional and expressive colors and inflections from which she draws. One seldom encounters singing that is this richly communicative yet so unfailingly lovely. Ms. Shaak is confronted with one formidable challenge after another in these extravagantly scored accompaniments, but she dispatches them with astonishing effortlessness. What is especially impressive is how she plays with such unbridled passion, yet remains a most sensitive and responsive partner. The disk also features her in two of Ms. Walker’s piano solos, “Semplice” and “Rhythms of the North Country.” The latter is an arresting soundscape of the natural world in which the piano is played in both conventional and unconventional ways. It’s a fascinating piece and one hopes that the composer will find the time to craft many more piano solos.

The disk includes texts as well as brief biographies of the composer and the two musicians. For information on the music, one is directed to the composer’s website, [gwynethwalker.com](http://gwynethwalker.com), where a plethora of resources are easily accessible and well worth exploring.

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**Visione: Luigi Mantegani 1894–1989 Selected Songs.** Roberta Canzian, soprano; Enza Ferrari, piano. (*Visione Music*; 26:10)

“Il Vespero,” “Benedizione,” “Novembre,” “Romanza,” “Visione,” “Quando più

ferve,” “Autunno e amore,” “Canzone d’autunno,” “Primavera.”

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Not everything buried is treasure, and in the course of digging for it one is likely to encounter a plethora of worthless tin cans along the way. What keeps people digging is the fervent hope that something truly special and even precious awaits discovery. Luigi Mantegani would seem to be such a treasure: a gifted and accomplished composer with an exceptionally interesting and inspiring life story, yet someone whose name and legacy are almost completely forgotten. Even in Italy, his beloved homeland, very few people are likely to know his music or anything about him. The recording at hand serves as an effective introduction to this composer’s music and leaves us wanting more.

According to the liner notes, Mantegani was just a youngster when he was blinded due to a doctor’s incompetence. Fortunately, his family was able to secure a fine education for him, including musical training at the Configliachi Institute for the Blind in Padova. Mantegani went on to enjoy a varied and successful career as a church choirmaster, organist, private piano teacher, professor, and even a pianist for silent films. (We’re told that among his many piano students was a certain young bishop by the name of Albino Luciani, who just a few years later would be elected Pope John Paul I.) Mantegani’s compositional efforts were focused mostly on sacred music, although he apparently composed operas as well. Sadly, the notes are a bit stingy with specifics on any of his compositions.

Alas, the recording itself is stingy as well. We’re treated to less than a half hour of music, and all ten songs seem to have been drawn from the same bolt