

mary kathleen ernst pianist

CD REVIEW NewMusicBox

Sounds Heard: 17 More Takes on those 88 Keys

...Two pianists who recently caught my attention with new releases devoted exclusively to American music composed within the last quarter century are Nicholas Phillips and Mary Kathleen Ernst. All in all, 17 composers are represented on their discs, showing that the instrument that once was a mainstay in households all across the land still has a home in the 21st century.

Mary Kathleen Ernst's new collection, *Keeping Time*, ups the ante on Phillips's by limiting her selection not only to recent music by American composers, but exclusively to women. For the folks who claim that such endeavors are no longer necessary in 2014, one need look no further than the fact that while Phillips's *American Vernacular* is a fabulous collection, it did not include a single female composer. But Ernst's restriction is anything but limiting and proves that worthy music is being created by everyone. In fact, I decided to feature both discs in this essay to try to balance things out a bit.

Keeping Time by Canadian-born, now Bay Area-based Vivian Fung lends not only its title to Ernst's anthology but also a guiding principle behind the selection of all the works herein; as Ernst states in her booklet notes, "it reflects the ongoing pulse in music" and also "honors ... composers writing during my lifetime." *Secret and Glass Gardens*, a 2000 work by Jennifer Higdon written for the Van Cliburn Competition's American Composer invitational, frequently enters territory that is worlds away from the frenetic virtuosity that usually characterizes her work and offers a glimpse of sumptuous lyricism that is equally appealing. Katherine Hoover's *Dream Dances* is a single movement that stitches together a wide range of dance-like sections in different tempos. Jing Jing Luo's *Mosquito* is, as its title implies, unbridled fluttering; it is tense but very exciting. (Warning: though it is labelled correctly on the tray card, the metadata for this track was mislabeled and so it appears as though it were part of the next piece; in fact, the erroneously metadata tags continue on for an additional eight tracks of that next piece.)

The most substantial work featured on the disc is *Chai Variations*, a 20-movement, 21-minute tour de force for solo piano by Judith Shatin that was inspired by the Jewish folksong "Eliahu HaNavi." *Chai*, the 18th letter of the Hebrew alphabet, is often used to represent the number 18 as well as life, hence Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* and this set of 18 brief variations with a theme at the beginning and a recapitulation of the theme at the very end. Ernst shows a particular affinity for this music, having previously recorded a whole disc of Shatin's music with violinist Hasse Borup which included the formidable solo piano piece *Widdershins*.



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"Her work offers a glimpse of sumptuous lyricism."

Spontaneous D-Combustion by Stefania de Kenessy, who shocked the sensibilities of the avant-garde at the beginning of the 21st century with her “Derriere Guard” movement, is true to de Kenessy’s purposefully backward-looking compositional aesthetics which provocatively reject most of the musical advances of the 20th century. But it’s not without some quirks. It is a series of seven short movements, but players can play as many as they wish in any order. Ernst chose three, ending the set with a manic Vivace in septimal meter that is not the kind of thing you’d typically hear in the 19th century.

Nancy Bloomer Deussen’s “A Recollection,” a gorgeously little piece akin to the Albumblätter that so popular during the Romantic era, is from a suite of two pieces entitled Musings: Circa 1940 that were inspired by her childhood in the Bronx as World War II was about to unravel. Coming at the end of Ernst’s CD, it almost has the feel of an encore—perhaps a not so subtle suggestion to other pianists since returning to the stage to play something like this after an entire concert program is an almost surefire way to garner even more enthusiastic applause.

- Frank J. Oteri



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