

CD Review: H. Leslie Adams, *Piano Etudes*, with Maria Thompson Corley & Thomas Otten

by Daniel Hathaway



Cleveland composer H. Leslie Adams (left), an Oberlin Conservatory graduate, spent the decade from 1997 to 2007 writing his *Twenty-six Etudes for Solo Piano*. He describes them in the liner notes to two recent recordings as “studies of varying styles, moods, tonalities, and thematic natures — each providing different technical challenges, while expressing my personal sense of beauty.”

Separately, Adams has written that one of his Oberlin composition teachers told him, “Leslie, you have a unique gift for melody. Stick with it.”

The composer adds, “I took his great advice and have pursued a ‘bel canto path’ throughout my career.’

That career has been a long one — Adams is now an octogenarian — and it has recently been crowned by the world premiere performances of his complete *Etudes* at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Two recitals by pianists Maria Corley and

Thomas Otten provided the grand finale to the UNC music department’s Etude Festival, held from October 26-November 2, 2014.



Corley had previously recorded the first dozen *Etudes* for Albany Records. Otten followed that with volume two, recorded at Hill Hall Auditorium at UNC in December, 2013 and January 2014 (also on the Albany label). Though we have Otten’s CD in hand, this article is based on a DVD we received of the live performances last November 1 and 2.

In a Broad Street Review blog entry, Jamaican-born, Canadian pianist Maria Thompson Corley, who did her undergraduate studies at the University of Alberta and won her master's and doctoral degrees from Juilliard, notes that the *Etudes* “explore all registers of the piano. The writing is often thick, with multiple climactic moments and, as one would expect with etudes, a wide variety of technical demands... There is certainly dissonance, but Leslie writes from the heart. Of course, you don't have to be neo-romantic with touches of jazz and popular music to write from the heart. But in Leslie's case, that's how things turned out.”



UNC music professor Thomas Otten first met Adams's *Etudes* at a festival in Chapel Hill in 2012. He has written, “As one unfamiliar with Leslie's music, I found myself in for a real treat! His style, though classically rooted, incorporates strong elements of jazz and popular music, giving it a crossover vibe that's most engaging ... invoking a sound world where Rachmaninoff meets Burt Bacharach, so to speak” (Africlassical blog).

Those comments from the two performers go a long way toward explaining the general attractiveness of Leslie Adams' music and the effect it has had on them as pianists. For the world premiere last November, both Corley and Otten took the trouble to memorize their recitals, a detail that makes their fine and nuanced performances — as seen on the DVD — even more committed.

In addition to the neo-romantic, jazz and popular music elements the performers have cited, the twenty-six etudes are at times reminiscent of Chopin, Debussy and Schumann, to name just a few pianist styles that seem deeply ingrained in the composer's consciousness, though those references are fleeting — vague references rather than borrowings. The piano writing is expert and varied, the formats ranging from nocturnes to fantasias, toccatas and ballads.

Adams noted that his last three *Etudes* are “settings of pop songs with lyrics I wrote many years ago — thus, they are ‘songs without words.’” And lovely settings of lovely songs they are. As Corley has written, “After a journey of big chords, glimmering scales, and rapid arpeggiation, the last etude is reflective. It's a satisfying choice, a built-in encore.”

Though these pieces break little new ground musically, they're wonderfully listenable and get under your skin in completely enjoyable ways. Because they present different levels of difficulty (and only one is set in such an alien key as D-sharp minor), Adams' *Etudes* should attract pianists of all stages. Perhaps some performers (or pairs of pianists)

will even want to take the complete set on as a project, as Corley and Otten so successfully have done.

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