

H. Leslie Adams: "Love Rejoices" CD review on "Bad Subjects."

Love Rejoices: Songs of H. Leslie Adams

This collection transcends the ideas that gave it birth and, irrespective of its claims upon the culture of the 20th century, stands on its own as an example of tenor virtuosity complemented by luxurious piano, and as a set of intriguing compositions by an innovative American composer.

Reviewed by Lindsey Eck, February 23 2001

The contemporary composer working in the tradition of classical art music faces a host of challenges. How to push the boundaries while keeping it accessible to one's audience? Should the composition be tonal, and risk retracing hackneyed ideas, or atonal, possibly leaving the audience with no frame of reference for adducing any meaning? What instrumentation? What recording techniques? Will there be a market if it can't be pigeonholed as crossover, contemporary, or international? Can I make a living without writing musicals for Disney?

When the composer adds the additional challenge of setting the texts of leading African-American writers of the last century in an audacious celebration of the black lyric, with other serious texts (including works by Edna St. Vincent Millay) thrown in to expand the project's ambitions even further, it becomes a real test of his ability to make music that intrigues many kinds of people without boring or offending any of them. Fortunately, H. Leslie Adams is up to the challenge with the songs delivered in *Love Rejoices* by the rich tenor of Darryl Taylor, accompanied by Robin Guyon piano.

Adams' songs do not seem to require an inordinately large range, so the challenge is one of tone and tonality. That is, rather than straining the tenor's gamut, the songs require a less flashy but equally demanding discrimination of small intervals. The spare instrumentation (piano only) and non-reliance on pop production techniques like overdubbing puts pressure on the concert vocalist beyond what is asked of pop performers.

Darryl Taylor meets these challenges with aplomb. There are numerous moments when Taylor accents prominent notes setting poignant lyrics with a mastery that imparts drama while avoiding melodrama. He gives each of these serious songs its due consideration, expertly fitting technique to mood. Taylor's control can be seen on the gentler numbers as in the tender "Lullaby Eternal" lyric by Joette McDonald). It is songs like this one, volume ranging only from pianissimo to mezzo piano yet making moderate demands on the high range during pianissimo moments, that distinguish the virtuoso from the mere stylist, and Taylor's execution is solid throughout.

Faced with seeming dichotomies such as a choice between the popular music traditions associated with Langston Hughes (Harlem Renaissance jazz, Delta blues) and James Weldon Johnson (Southern hymnody) on the one hand, and the demands of 20th-century iconoclasm on the other, Adams chooses to transcend them rather than compromise.

Consider the complex tonality-masquerading-as-atonality of "Drums of Tragedy." Rather than lapse into a decorative historicism as lesser composers might have been tempted to do, Adams chooses a disturbing dissonance to set Hughes' lyrics alluding to the Crucifixion. His composition in fact is contemporary to Hughes in another sense; rather than the Harlem Renaissance and the jazz age it evokes the dissonant modernist experimentation of the first half of the century as seen in the compositions of Charles Ives and early Kurt Weill.

Even when Adams draws on the Southern blues tradition, as in Hughes' "Homesick Blues," he warps the basic tonality of blues (based largely on sevenths and an ambiguity between major and minor thirds) into something much more complex in its dissonance, while keeping the basic twelve-bar structure and 12/8 swing that keep the composition a true blues and enable the setting of the Hughes lyric, clearly intended for twelve-bar treatment. Taylor's climactic pair of notes that end this composition are a particular demonstration of his ability. Though the format encompassing multiple short songs makes the album feel like a long stroll, in fact it is more of a half-marathon at nearly 75 minutes. That scope is fitting for a collection that spans an American composer's career and decades of American poetry.

The album draws from previous Adams song cycles (such as *Five Millay Songs* and *Dunbar Lyrics*), reassembling them into two new cycles with a shorter prolog. Though the mood of the entire album is serious, the second section ("The Wider View") offers lighter and more optimistic, forward-looking lyrics and more expansive, consonant compositions. In contrast, the first section ("Night Songs") introspects with darker and, if you will, blacker lyrics, whereas the prolog composed mostly of lyrics by Edna St. Vincent Millay, helps to root the album within the mainstream culture of the 20th century.

This arrangement works emotionally, as in a play with two acts; the more intense meditations of the first act find their catharsis in the second and the collection resolves with the tender Paul Laurence Dunbar lyric "Love Response." This passionate song addressed to a beloved is placed to answer the possessive maternal love of "Lullaby Eternal" placed near the end of the first section. Though I am not familiar with the original collections from which these pieces are drawn, it appears that these gems are only flattered by their new setting.

This collection transcends the ideas that gave it birth and, irrespective of its claims upon the culture of the 20th century, stands on its own as an example of tenor virtuosity complemented by luxurious piano, and as a set of intriguing compositions by an innovative American composer. For that reason, *Love Rejoices* will only help to enhance H. Leslie Adams' reputation among composers of the 20th century, while we look ahead to what he may have to say in the 21st.

*Love Rejoices* is an Albany Records release.

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