

COMPACT DISC REVIEWS

Tsippi Fleischer: *Lieder*

Saga-Portrait; *Lead Life—A Cycle of Five Songs*; *At the End of the Ways*; *Ancient Love*; *Electro-Acoustic Cycle*; *Avot Yeshurun—A Cycle of Three Songs*; and several other works, performed by many different artists and ensembles.

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JANET MORROW KING

What is the definition of *Lieder*? As a singer, this word brings to my mind the usual English translation, “Art Song,” pre-existing poetry set to music. I think of the typical performing forces as solo voice and piano, which can be expanded to include various other instruments and even full orchestra. The title of Tsippi Fleischer’s newest recording stretches this understanding even further, for it includes many different genres of composition with at least one performer—or a recording of one—who uses the voice to express a text. This is rarely limited only to “singing” as that term is conventionally understood. Rather, Fleischer’s songs exploit the full expressive range of the human vocal cords, from whispers and speech through chants and screams, from glottal fry to high-pitched shrieks, sighs, groans, grunts, and giggles, and electronic combinations and computer manipulations of all of the above.

This CD set is imposing, including two discs, each over sixty-five minutes long, and three separate half-inch-thick booklets of notes and translations—one each in English, German, and Hebrew. With one exception, the thirteen works use voice and words in some way, and were composed over the past fifteen years. They include several solo song cycles, two choral song cycles, a “computerized oratorio,” opera excerpts, a dramatic “miniature,” and a symphony. The large and varied number of performers, venues, and events at which these were recorded attests to Fleischer’s stature as a leading and distinguished composer, both in her homeland of Israel and in international circles. Reflecting her education and continuing fascination with languages and cultures, the works include texts in eight different languages: Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Yiddish, German, English, French, and Russian.

I was unaware of any of these details when I first listened to this CD on a road trip. I knew of Fleischer, having used her earlier CD *Vocal Music* (Opus One 158, reviewed in the *Journal of the IAWM*, June 1994) a number of years ago in my women in music classes, but had not kept up with her more recent output. Without even glancing at the playlist on the back of the box, I put the first disc into my car stereo. The opening piece, *Fibonacci Dance*, lively and compelling, with insistent rhythms based on the Fibonacci series, was not surprising (other than not being a *song*!), reminding me of the style I remembered from the earlier disc. Then the song cycle *Saga-Portrait* began, and I was caught up in a mature, dramatic world of wide-ranging vocal expression with strong, powerful and frequently dark emotions, found in nearly every work in the collection. As I continued to listen, I was repeatedly amazed at the variety of sonic landscapes Fleischer is able to create, both with manipulations and combinations

of vocal sounds, as well as with limited and unusual instrumental forces, continuously in the service of expressing the emotional impact of the text.

In a 2006 interview in the *Journal of the IAWM*, Fleischer stated that opera is her preferred genre. Even though only a few of the selections are actually excerpted from her chamber operas, this preference definitely shows in all the works here, especially the large song cycles. Of these, the two most original, compelling, and dramatic works are *Saga-Portrait* and *At the End of the Ways*, which both employ electronic compositional techniques to enhance the expression of wrenching emotions, and the sorrow and regret for the state of the world that makes these feelings inevitable.

Saga-Portrait (2002) is a song-cycle in a very unusual and expressive form. This work stunned me with its visceral expressionism when I first heard it. Aurally, it seemed to be a small vocal ensemble, with an ever-changing number of extremely virtuosic soloists performing difficult harmony and counterpoint along with a dizzying array of vocal effects and extended techniques. After reading the notes, I learned that it is actually an ensemble of one: Etty Ben-Zaken, mezzo-soprano, for whom the work was composed, accompanied by a tape of three different lines of her own previously-recorded voice “in a spectrum of colors...serving as counterpoint, obbligato and touches of pointillism” (composer’s notes).

Two poems in Hebrew by Israeli poet Dan Pagis (1930-1986) serve as the text for the work. “My Childhood Slipped Away” and “The Portrait” both deal with the loss of innocence. The first poem is more lyrical and is set in a simple waltz as the introduction to the set. The second poem is more graphic, telling about a painter trying to paint a little boy who fidgets, grows older with each movement, develops wrinkles, turns into an old man, and withers away before the portrait can be completed. The next four sections of the piece, using fragments of this text, are variations on a simple chant-like motif, introduced in a childlike tone by the singer. In each variation, the increasing deterioration of the child—hair whitening, skin wrinkling, turning blue, and peeling from the bones—and the growing fear and disorientation of the child, the painter, and the narrator are mirrored in the distortions and sonic complexities of the music. A final, more static coda tells us that “the old man is gone...whither shall I go?” as the listener is also left to ponder the mysteries of mortality. The vocal capabilities and musical expertise of Ben-Zaken are incredible, as is the composer’s imagination and skill in the creation of this stunning work of art.

Equally compelling and original is *At the End of the Ways* (1998), described by Fleischer as a “Computerized Oratorio for Dramatic Baritone and Cello.” The text is taken from “At the end of the ways, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Beredichev stands and demands the Almighty’s answer” from *Streets of the River* (1951), prominent Israeli poet Uri Zvi Grinberg’s last book. The poem is an impassioned questioning of God, by a Jew who is completely disillusioned and angry with God’s treatment of the Chosen People. Fleischer has divided the text into sections which she assigns to different charac-

ters as an oratorio: a leader of the People, a narrator, a cantor, a chorus of the People, and “God in His ugliness.”

Unlike a conventional oratorio, where these roles would be filled by soloists and choir with orchestral support, here all the musical material was recorded by a solo baritone, actor/singer Doron Tavori, and a solo cellist, Orna Herzog. The unique dramatic and emotion-baring sounds of each character are produced by computer elaboration and manipulation of the original music. The voice part is layered together at many different pitch levels when it is heard in the chorus sections. Parallel melodic lines with the voice and the cello are sounded together at very close intervals, often seeming less than a half-tone, to provide a distinctive timbre for other sections. Cello sounds, whether melodic, percussive or otherwise, are sometimes combined to produce an effect of a larger instrumentation.

In the notes, Fleischer describes the ending chorus as the people weeping at their decision to abandon God as He seems to have forsaken them, as “a requiem...with the projection of a many-voiced, soft heterophony, with teardrops falling.” The impact on me as the listener, a combination of being gripped with the emotional impact of the work as well as amazed by the compositional achievement possible with this computer technique, is difficult to describe in mere words—it must be said with music.

Both of these works must be heard to be understood completely, and that alone makes obtaining and hearing this recording important. Neither work can be reproduced “live” for a concert (except possibly *Saga-Portrait* only by Ben-Zaken herself) due to the recordings of electronic manipulations. Thus, these CDs are an aural museum for these two works, as well as the *Electro-Acoustic Cycle* in which both songs are the recorded results of either studio or live electronic manipulations of the original vocal sounds. Like visiting the Louvre to see the *Mona Lisa*, the listener must “visit” this CD to experience these works of sonic art. Yet there are many other compositions included which can be performed in a live concert situation. Due to space limitations, I can mention only a few in detail.

The longest work on the recording, and also the one most like traditional art song, is *Lead Life—A Cycle of Five Songs* (2001-2). The unifying elements of the cycle are the performing medium: solo voice and piano, and the theme of the poems: “the expression of deep regret at the growing loss of innocence in every world within our world” (composer’s notes). The text for each song is by a different poet, and in a different language, which ironically supports the unity of the cycle by demonstrating the concern for the prevalence of this tragic condition as a trans-cultural phenomenon. While in the process of being written, separate movements from the cycle were performed at varied occasions by different artists, so it is presented here as a compilation.

The first song, “Weltschmerz” with German text by Else Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945), is performed by Carolyn Grace, mezzo-soprano, and Christian Streich, piano. Over sixteen minutes long, this song is a tour-de-force for the singer, both vocally and dramatically. The extremes of range and dynamics, virtuosic melismas, a variety of extended vocal

techniques—especially the vocalization of single consonants to illustrate the wind and the lightning—are all handled beautifully by Grace, as are the demands of the equally complex piano part. The second movement, “Two Family Songs,” combines two short poems in Hebrew by Shin Shifra (b. 1931). These are performed by Yahli Toren, soprano, and Rosalia Sheposhnikov and Tanya Borisova, piano. This music, which Fleischer calls “exotic Israeli impressionism” in her notes, is more subdued. Toren’s flexible voice excels at expressing the nuances of the text, floating over the dense chords of the four-hand piano part supporting the second poem.

The remaining three songs are done by Marina Levitt, soprano, and Irina Poliakov, piano. With a text in French by Paul Verlaine, “Le ciel est, par-dessus de toit” has a flavor of impressionism, using a whole-tone scale and quotations of a motif from Debussy’s “Le petit berger.” The elegant dance tune of “The Waltz of the Devil” belies its grief-stricken text, Esther Kunda’s poem “Bereaved” (in English). Similarly, the happy, almost joking, music accompanying the final poem in Russian, “Kupite Luk” by Genrix Saggir (1928-1999), conceals the tragedy of desperate parents trying to sell their little daughter. Levitt’s vocal artistry is evident as she changes her timbre, moods, and languages expertly to match each emotion and dramatic situation in these three songs.

In 2005, Fleischer prepared a new version of the cycle for soprano and instrumental ensemble. At its premiere in 2006, the cycle was performed for the first time in its entirety. A “Bonus” band at the end of Disc II presents a sample of the new arrangement, with “Kupite Luk” sung by Merav Barnea, soprano, with flute, oboe, horn, cello and xylophone. The instruments add a good deal of color and expression to this song. The cycle would be a wonderful but challenging piece to present on a vocal chamber music recital, due to the length of the entire work, about thirty-three minutes, and given the difficulty and length of the first movement alone.

Brief moments of respite from the generally dark and emotionally heavy atmosphere of the recording are found in two choral cycles composed for young voices. *Avot Yeshurun—A Cycle of Three Songs* (2004) for mixed chorus, four flutes, two oboes, and bass clarinet is performed by students of the Thelma Yellin High School for the Performing Arts in Givatayim, Israel. Each of the short poems in Hebrew by Yeshurun (1904-1992) is illustrated both visually and sonically in the score: a “pile-up” of short musical motives representing how Hebrew letters have become square over the layers of generations in “The Script”; crescendi and increasing rhythmic motion in “Drive On”; and luminous clouds of sixteen-voice polytonal chords in “Light-Night.” The archaic atmosphere of the poetry is represented by a simple pentatonic scale, which serves as the tonal material, varied in different ways to provide a unique sonic world for each movement. While somewhat challenging, this work is certainly accessible for performance by select high school and college choruses, as demonstrated by the excellent young musicians on the recording, and would provide a great multi-cultural addition to a program.

Ancient Love (2006) is a purely delightful musical experience. This cycle of four love songs is performed brilliantly

by the Tölzer Knabenchor, directed by Gerhard Schmidt-Gaden, with Axel Wolf, lute. As in *Lead Life*, the text for each movement is in a different language: an excerpt from the Song of Solomon in Hebrew, a Minnesinger's poem in medieval German, a Bergerette in French, and a Palestinian folksong in Arabic. The unifying element is the theme of love, and the joy, disappointment, yearning, excitement, and despair that accompanies it. In this work, love is fresh and innocent, with lighthearted and uplifting music, crafted perfectly for a treble choir with excellent skills. That this poetry is "ancient" is underscored by the use of simple textures, much more consonant harmonies in general, and lute as the accompanying instrument. The movements are linked, with a longer lute interlude between the third and fourth, and the cycle concludes with a short coda that combines musical and textual fragments from each song. While Fleischer has subtitled this work as being for boys' choir, I would recommend it as a beautiful, cross-cultural challenge to any director in charge of a select treble chorus, from advanced community youth choirs through college women's groups.

The remaining works on the program include *Symphony No. 5* (2004), subtitled "Israeli-Jewish Collage," and several

New CD: Four Orchestral Works of Judith Lang Zaimont

Naxos has issued a new CD of premiere recordings of four orchestral works by Judith Lang Zaimont (catalog number 8.559619). *Chroma – Northern Lights, Ghosts, Elegy for Strings*, and *Stillness – Poem for Orchestra* are all presented in performances by Kirk Trevor and the Slovak National Symphony Orchestra. Each of the four connects in its own way with the composer's lifelong interest in questions of memory and artistic heritage, and all the works highlight Ms. Zaimont's control of nuanced orchestral color. In *Chroma – Northern Lights* (1985) the changing patterns of light and color become a comparable musical display to the polar Aurora's continual visual shift.

Ghosts (2000) is one of three independent movements for large string orchestra. This movement features one of the composer's personal motifs, which at times joins with those of her six "ghost composer" companions—Scriabin, Britten, Ravel, Berg, Christopher Rouse and Laurie Anderson. Another of these "memory" movements, *Elegy* (1998) for massed strings, is plain in expression yet intensely felt and is dedicated to the memory of the composer's aunt, Mildred Barrett-Leonard Friedman. *Ghosts* and *Elegy* are movements from the composer's *Symphony No. 2*, "Remember Me." Violin soloists are Robert Marecek in *Ghosts* and *Elegy for Strings* and Josef Skorepa, also in *Ghosts*.

Symphony-length Stillness (2004) is a "poem" for full orchestra written to explore means to progress over time without necessarily moving forward using traditional harmony and melody. It was written at Copland House during Zaimont's residency there.

shorter vocal compositions including the Disc I "Bonus" track of two arias from rehearsals in Cologne for the chamber opera *Medea* (1995). A prominent feature in the symphony is the electronically recorded and manipulated singing of cantors chanting the *Kol Nidrei* prayer, with the sounds of a shofar ensemble, occasionally interspersed with a short phrase from an Israeli pop singer. *The Mother* (2005) for contralto and four flutes, an excerpt from the chamber opera *Victoria and the Men* (2001/2005) for female vocalist and eight men: four guitarists, three percussionists and a cellist (who play onstage and also sing and interact with the singer), and *Mein Volk* for soprano and guitar are most interesting because of how Fleischer has orchestrated the accompanying instruments in unusual and creative ways to augment the dramatic content of each text. *Abhorrence* (2007), subtitled "A Miniature for String Orchestra and Soprano Voice of a Childlike Nature," voiced by Fleischer herself, is the most recent composition in the collection, which vividly expresses her deep revulsion in reaction to hearing a news story about a young girl who had been raped by her father and brother. Despite its inherent tragedy and despair, the ending expresses a faint glimmer of hope that the girl's soul has the inner strength to endure this ultimate loss of innocence.

The booklets accompanying the CD set are beautifully prepared and quite thorough. Fleischer herself is responsible for writing the extensive notes, transliterations and phonetic keys. For each work, a descriptive overview is provided, along with a photo and biographical details about the poet or librettist, a translation of the text, and in the case of Hebrew, Arabic, or Aramaic texts, a phonetic transliteration. In most cases, additional detailed notes and personal insights from Fleischer's journal are given. For a few works, the opening measures of the musical scores are included. As a singer who is also a language and diction specialist, I very much welcomed the attention given to the poems. I learned a great deal about Jewish and Israeli poets, most of whom I did not know. The English translations are well-done, with the exception of the Verlaine, which was taken from a 1909 translation of his poetry that was apparently more concerned with the rhyme scheme than the nuances of meaning. The transliterations of the Semitic languages were very helpful, although I wish that the complete text of *At the End of the Ways* had been translated and transliterated rather than only the highlights.

Yet, this scholarly abundance of information brought up some questions for me, which perhaps also apply to all performances and recordings of modern art music. Is it possible to have too much information about a work, or can we let the sounds speak for themselves? To best "appreciate" a given work, should we read the notes before or after our initial listening? Does following along with a word-by-word translation enhance or detract from the music itself? For me, the answers are mixed. I found that for most of the works I heard in my car before reading anything about them, the tonal and emotional impact of the music was more than enough for me to intuit the content and meaning. Yet, for a descriptive work such as *Abhorrence*, or any of the opera excerpts or other pieces which tell a specific story, knowing

the background and the translation definitely enhances the meaning of the music. And, especially important in the case of those works, which can be heard only as recordings in this aural museum, Fleischer has thoroughly “curated” this collection of her most recent vocal works so that they may be studied and understood as a vital contribution to twenty-first-century music. Other listeners’ reactions to this music and my questions will no doubt be varied—so I do recommend that you hear this recording and find out for yourself.

For additional information about Fleischer’s music and for reviews of her previous CDs, please see <http://tsippifleischer.com>.

Janet Morrow King retired from Colorado State University in 2009 after a twenty-four-year career of teaching voice, diction, opera, vocal pedagogy and women in music. King holds the Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Minnesota and has sung professionally in opera, concerts, and churches in Germany and Austria, and in many states from Missouri to California. Over the past fifteen years, her recitals and conference papers have frequently concerned female composers, especially those of the nineteenth century. In 2006, she, soprano Peggy Holloway, and pianist David King released a CD recording, Send Me a Dream: the Art Songs of Marion Bauer. Janet is currently a second-year student at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA, where she participates in chapel music as a singer and pianist, and studies feminist theology (among other topics).