

faintest of margins, I prefer this one because of its coupling with the Suite.

O'CONNOR

KORNGOLD: *Much Ado about Nothing*;
see GOLDMARK

LAITMAN: *Songs*;
THOMAS: *Songs*
Natalie Mann, s; Jeffrey Panko, p
Albany 1453—61 minutes

A superb exponent of contemporary American songs, soprano Natalie Mann has a voice that is simultaneously strong and tender, passionate and subtle. Her phrasing is sensitive to the texts and unfailingly musical. She never grandstands, and her most touching moments are often the quiet ones, but she can turn on the power when necessary. Often I find myself complaining about shrieky, inappropriately operatic voices when reviewing releases of American art song. Such is not the case here.

The repertory in this program is ideal for Mann's gifts. Much of the album is given over to songs by the prolific Lori Laitman, a composer who is squarely in the American-romantic art song tradition of Barber and Rorem, though her harmonies are riper. Laitman has written more than 250 songs, along with choral works and operas, and she continues to be popular. Her style is lyrical, and she writes piano accompaniment that is transparent and appealing.

It is easy to like this listener-friendly music, though too much of it at one time is like a sugar high. The opening song, 'The Metropolitan Tower', is perhaps the most ingratiating, capturing Sarah Teasdale's "flower of amber light". Even the songs with downbeat texts are tuneful—the gentle melancholy of 'A Winter Night', for example.

The perfume of 'Old Tunes' sounds very much "like fragrance born on the hush of the wind". The love songs 'A Strong House' and 'The Hour' are straightforwardly tender except for the ambiguous ending of the former. The whimsy of 'To a Loose Woman', depicting how we confuse passion with fashion, is a playful contrast. Laitman's settings of the popular contemporary poet Mary Oliver are a bit less sentimental than the Teasdale works. The "burnished disks" in the faces of 'Sunflowers' are lighter than we might expect. In 'Dreams', the "dark buds" of Oliver's night visions open with Laitman's most nocturnal harmonies. The "unforgettable fury of light" in 'Dawn' is evoked with piercing intensity.

Laitman's Emily Dickinson settings, three of which appear in this program, are not as astringent as Copland's, and they mostly avoid Dickinson's dark side. 'Some Keep the Sab-

bath' has Laitman's characteristic sweetness; the more unadorned 'In this Short Life' and 'I Stepped from Plank to Plank' are more idiomatic. Dickinson is technically a 19th Century poet, but her minimalist, haiku-like style, so far ahead of its time, resists lushness. Still, Laitman's music is usually in touch with the text, as in the stepwise patterns of the 'I Stepped from Plank to Plank'.

The Dickinson songs by Richard Pearson Thomas, whose works take up the last nine tracks of this program, also have over-ripe moments, but are still highly effective. Dickinson is often set by American composers, though the precision of her work is a challenge; Thomas's Dickinson songs are some of the most varied and expressive I have heard in years. Best is the understated eloquence of 'A Certain Slant of Light', much of which is a capella. Mann handles this chant-like piece with exceptional subtlety. The more dissonant 'What if I Say' moves toward a stark abruptness that exactly embodies the poem's meaning. 'Wild Nights' is delicate and playful for such a passionate poem, but the lack of heaviness is refreshing. The piano writing is as delightfully playful as the vocal writing. Even more surprising is the lightness of "the seal despair" and "look of death" in 'There's a Certain Slant of Light', a counterpoint to "the heft of cathedral tunes" in the text. The chilling power of this poem needs no additional heaviness. 'I Never Saw a Moor', the simplest of these songs, has an arcing, wordless vocalise reminiscent of Delius. Mann's gorgeous soprano really soars there.

A final reason to celebrate this album is the exquisite pianism of Jeffrey Panko, not only in his legato playing in the more lyrical songs but in the way he handles ambiguous moments such as the mysterious harmonies in Pearson's *Twilight*, an evocative set of songs with poems by Christina Rossetti. The shifting cadences in the final setting is a fine example; so is the misty pedal effect in the fade-out ending of Laitman's Dickinson song, 'In this Short Life'. The warm, plush recorded sound is as inviting as the music and performances.

SULLIVAN

LANSKY: *Arches; Horizons; Notes to Self; Partita; Line & Shadow*
Felix Fan, vc; David Starobin, g; David Cossin, elec; Odense Symphony/ Justin Brown
Bridge 9405—72 minutes

Paul Lansky continues to write attractive, stimulating, and accessible works that should appeal to listeners interested in recent music. These four pieces were all written in the last decade.

Arches (2007) is a revised, slightly extended