

also a writer of fiction and nonfiction without telling us anything more than that. Perhaps this frustration is borne of the fact that Elsa Respighi's songs are truly intriguing, and we are left wanting to know more of her music and more about the elusive genius who created it. Certainly, the superlative performances on this recording are an important first step in bringing her legacy into the spotlight where it belongs.

Full texts and translations are included.

Experience: Songs by Lori Laitman & Richard Pearson Thomas. Natalie Mann, soprano; Jeffrey Panko, piano. (Albany TROY 1453; 60:53)

Laitman: *Metropolitan Tower & Other Songs*: "The Metropolitan Tower," "A Winter Night," "Old Tunes," "The Strong House," "The Hour," "To a Loose Woman." *Sunflowers*: "Sunflowers," "Dreams," "Sunrise." *In This Short Life*: "Some keep the Sabbath," "I stepped from plank to plank," "In this short life." Thomas: *Twilight*: "A Birthday," "Mirage," "Song." *At last, to be identified!*: "Doubt Me! My Dim Companion!" "What if I say I shall not wait!" "Wild Nights!—Wild Nights!" "I never saw a Moor," "There's a certain slant of light," "At last, to be identified!"

Lori Laitman is the main headliner in *Experience*, a stunning new release by soprano Natalie Mann and pianist Jeffrey Panko that features three Laitman song cycles plus two cycles by Richard Pearson Thomas. Collections that feature nothing but contemporary art songs can sometimes be wearying affairs that leave one's head spinning with bewilderment. This collection avoids that by presenting a

wisely selected mix of songs that are fresh and wide-ranging yet somehow cohesive. Moreover, every song here seems to suit these two musicians perfectly; the fact that there was close collaboration with both composers in the preparation of this disk surely has something to do with that.

Natalie Mann is a very talented up-and-coming singer whose résumé includes a triumphant debut at Carnegie Hall and an Encouragement Award from the Metropolitan Opera. Contemporary music appears to be the primary focus of her artistic energies, but her lovely sound seems to have served her well in the music of Mozart, Verdi, and Puccini, among others. Hers is a gleaming, shimmering sound that seems to emerge with little or no effort, floating on a seemingly inexhaustible stream of breath. One must especially appreciate the flawless legato line with which she sings even the most difficult of these songs, and the easy warmth with which she rides the highest climaxes. Here and there the diction leaves something to be desired, but that's not exactly an uncommon complaint when dealing with modern art song. For the most part, however, Mann is a clear and expressive communicator who sings these songs with care and affection. Pianist Jeffrey Panko is her able and attentive partner.

The disk opens with Lori Laitman's very first song cycle, *Metropolitan Tower & Other Songs*, which she wrote in 1992 at the request of soprano Lauren Wagner, a good friend and former Interlochen roommate. Laitman had done a fair amount of composing by that point, but had written almost no art songs at all and was understandably intimidated at the prospect of failing in her first attempt in the genre. What seems to have sus-

tained her through her initial fears was the beauty of Sara Teasdale's exquisite poetry, and the cycle's opening song, "The Metropolitan Tower," came together with amazing rapidity and ease. This gentle gem belongs on any list of the finest art songs of the last thirty years. "A Winter Night," which follows it, paints a haunting picture of how one's own sadness is akin to being out in the cold, both in the stark phrases of the singer's melody and the pungent accompaniment against which it is laid. "Old Tunes" is a poignant reflection on how our sweetest memories are ultimately elusive, and that past joys really cannot be fully tasted again. "I know the laughter and the pain," writes Teasdale, "of times that will not come again." Laitman, even as an inexperienced song composer, knew enough to let this text sing its own melody. Her music here, as in so many of her other songs, is not an intruder, but rather a welcome partner that helps an already beautiful text take wing. "The Strong House" and "The Hour" are similarly haunting songs, but Laitman's chooses to end the cycle with the saucy fun of "To a Loose Woman," a brilliant choice. This is the first recording of the complete cycle, and it is a stunning performance by singer and pianist alike.

Sunflowers was commissioned by Dr. Adelaide Whitaker as a gift for her former teacher, Thomas Hause. Laitman calls this "one of my most complex song cycles," and says that it took her nine months to complete it, even though it consists of only three songs. Surely that complexity sprang from the intriguing, multi-hued, nature-inspired texts of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver, and Laitman responds with an exceptionally wide palette of colors and textures. This cycle poses some of the steepest

challenges for the soprano, but her technique serves her well. *In This Short Life* also consists of three songs, but their total length is about a third as long as *Sunflowers*, and their emotional and poetic range is a bit more modest in scope. But there is a staggering amount of beauty and profundity in these sublime miniatures, each of which features the incomparable poetry of Emily Dickinson. Two of the songs were birthday presents for the composer's mother, while the third was a birthday present for her father, which might help explain the highly personal nature of these songs. As is so often the case, Laitman has an unfailing ability to grasp the central essence of each of these poems and to express that essence in musical terms that seem fully authentic and perfectly true to Dickinson's unique voice and vision. Art song composition does not

get much better than this, and Mann and Panko are inspired to some of their most sensitive music-making in the entire release.

The other composer featured in this recital, Richard Pearson Thomas, may not be quite as well known to NATS members, but this Montana native is rapidly making a name for himself, not only as a composer, but also as an innovative force for drawing young people into music. His music has a rhapsodic vitality to it, even in his quietest songs, and a disarming sense of spontaneity that draws us into each piece. He writes very effectively for the voice and also knows how to set lyrics with clarity and sensitivity. His cycle *Twilight* features three texts by Christina Rosetti, whose colorful and evocative poetry seems a perfect fit for Thomas's warm hearted and impassioned music. Similarly, these songs

seem to bring out the best in Natalie Mann's singing; she seems to know exactly how to caress these beautifully sculpted phrases, and Jeffrey Panko provides the lush, flowing foundation over which she can soar. In the cycle *At Last, to be Identified!*, Thomas sets the slightly more austere texts of Emily Dickinson, but his music somehow works just as well as it does with Rosetti's more lavish poetry. By the way, it is in songs like "What if I say I shall not wait!" that Panko must deliver some of the most astonishing pianistic fireworks heard in the entire disk. He is a fearless pianist and his partner responds in kind with singing that is downright thrilling.

Biographies are included for the performers as well as the two composers, but almost no information is given about any of the works themselves. Full texts are included.

