

Recorded Sound Reviews

***Moonstrung Air:
Choral and Vocal Music
of Gregory W. Brown***

The Crossing
Donald Nally, director
“Spring” Ensemble
Eric Dudley, conductor
New York Polyphony
Navona Records CD NV5989
(2015; 64’58”)

Composer Gregory Brown lives and works in Massachusetts. While essentially tonal, his music has tantalizing harmonic twists in which added or passing dissonances lead to unexpected harmonic resolutions. His distinct harmonies often result from the use of imitative textures. This music is rich without making use of complicated passages or much *divisi*. This new CD presents six settings of Brown’s works, offering music that illustrates human admiration of nature in rather subtle and elegant ways. *Five women bathing by moonlight* is a setting of a poem by Richard Wilbur, a double Pulitzer prize winner. The text captures the poet’s observations of a seaside party in 1940s, while an expressive harmonic idiom makes it sound almost surreal, dream-like, and seductive. The use of imitative entries is reminiscent of Renaissance music, while a playful ornament in the work’s final section brings to mind the

Baroque period. The Crossing, under Donald Nally, brings out the musical texture with refinement and precision, and the choir tuning is superb.

Vidi Aquam is for mixed chorus and piano, with some short solo sections for mezzo-soprano and baritone. Its text is drawn from a sixteenth-century treatise, *Del Beneficio di Giesu Christo Crocifisso* [*The Benefit of Christ Crucified*], written by a group of Catholic reformers who believed in the idea that salvation comes by faith alone; a person’s individual deeds are of no consequence. Brown used the introduction from the English translation of this text, organizing it into three sections.

He chose the Roman Catholic chant *Vidi aquam* as a framing device for two reasons: firstly, its text refers to the notion of *sola fide* [“by faith alone”], and secondly because of the water images in the text. The first movement opens with the chant and closes with the Alleluia in unison; the slow moving vocal lines contrast with the active rhythm in the piano. The second movement is framed by the piano, while in the third, the active choral parts are set over extensive trills and chords in the piano. An intensive, imitative texture in the choir leads to an exciting Alleluia. Nally and The

Crossing, with John Grecia at the piano, achieve a good balance in the complex interwoven texture of this spectacular performance.

Spring sets a translation of a classical Greek text by Anacreon. Eric Dudley’s Spring Ensemble paints an expressive picture of the season, from its first shy flowers to full bloom. The work develops out of a six-part canon, its calm character gradually becoming more animated. A series of imitative points shape each phrase, leading ultimately to a brief homophonic episode followed by rhythmic imitations evoking the image of light raindrops. The air vibrates with the concluding long chords.

Missa Charles Darwin was commissioned by New York Polyphony. As its title suggests, it follows the structure of the traditional Roman Catholic mass but replaces the sacred text by selections from Darwin’s seminal *On the Origin of Species*. The composer draws parallels and contrasts between the proportions, structure, and text of the Mass and of Darwin’s text. The imitative structure of the music is reminiscent of Renaissance Mass settings. The work is organized by a motive that the composer created by “translating” into music a line from the DNA of Darwin’s finches, which is then subjected to imitation and to techniques such as mutation, inser-



tion, and deletion. The concluding Amen includes an indirect quotation of the Latin “Ite Missa est,” the final part of the Mass text.

The traditional Portuguese Christmas carol tune *Entraí, Pastores, Entraí* comes from a volume of transcriptions by the Portuguese composer Fernando Lopes-Graça. After a soprano unison within each verse, the texture becomes richer, fuller, and denser as the ornamented chant-like melody populates all voices. The Crossing brings a warm vocal color to this performance that is both touching and captivating. Finally, New York Polyphony performs Brown’s *Three American Folk Hymns*, arrangements of popular American tunes. “The Dying Californian” gets a variety of textural treatment. “Sweet Hour of Prayer” is Brown’s take on an 1859 tune by W. B. Bradbury, to a text by the blind English minister William W. Walford. “The Morning Trumpet” is scored as a part-song with occasional imitation.

“Moonstrung Air” offers sophisticated, complex, easy-to-enjoy music. Its purity puts it in the tradition of Renaissance music but in a modern idiom that uses a contemporary sound pallet. Brown, a singer himself, achieves balance in terms of register, volume, and technical difficulty; and his preference for imitative textures adds fluidity to music that should appeal to both audiences and performers, a must for anyone interested in beautiful yet intricate contemporary choral music.

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