

As at First. Adam Sherkin, piano. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 18212, 2012. 1 compact disc (67:12). Contents: *German Promises* (17:01) – *Amadeus A.D.* (2:24) – *Daycurrents* (5:03) – *As at First* (13:23) – *Three Preludes* (9:59) – *Meditations* (5:12) – *Sunderance* (14:21).

As at First is a recording of piano works by the young Canadian composer Adam Sherkin (born in 1982). All of the performances are by the composer himself. As such, the listener can assume that these are definitive recordings, performed exactly as Sherkin intends the music to sound. The compositions span a period of eight years, from 2003 through 2011, so they represent youthful works—some written while he was still a student, and others as a professional freelance musician.

An initial observation would be that the earlier works on this disc contain more harmonic and structural interest than the later ones. Likewise, there are moments on the disc when one hears sounds that are reminiscent of some of the great piano composers of the twentieth century, a scenario that is not unexpected when a young composer is still searching for his voice. These two factors lead to a collection of works that share a great deal of sameness of sound, with moments that catch the attention of the listener, but not extended moments.

Two of the earliest works, *Amadeus A.D.* from 2006 and *Three Preludes* from 2003, show the most harmonic and structural interest. *Amadeus A.D.* gives flavors of bitonality in the manner of Ives (or perhaps Crumb); there are also interesting textural contrasts resulting from juxtaposing the extremes of the keyboard's registers. In *Three Preludes*, the opening "Breach" reveals some use of specific techniques of development. "Impasse" provides some interesting pointillism in the manner of Webern or Rzewski, and "Eclipse" provides audible imitation (described in the accompanying notes as a "palindromic canon"). In contrast, another work from the same time frame, *Meditations* (2006), lacks the compositional procedures mentioned above, thus the imagery evoked by the various titles of the movements does not come across. "Autumn Tango," for example, is amorphous in its soundscape, which may perhaps succeed on a "meditative" level, but does not provide enough allusion of the tango rhythm to bring that particular dance to mind.

According to Sherkin's notes, *Sunderance* (2008) is "inspired by the wondrous words and terrifying visions of Virginia Woolf." While he suggests that the piece should be heard as having "fierce changes," "violent edges," and "temperamental outbursts," there is little in the music itself to evoke such high drama. The dissonance is seldom strident, so there is little to resolve: the rhythmic outbursts rarely gather enough momentum to create any edginess.

The remaining three works, *Daycurrents* from 2009, and *German Promises* and *As at First*, both written in 2011, move even further away from the dramatic. *Daycurrents* is ostensibly written as an exploration of sonata form. While repeated listening eventually leads the listener to

denote the arrival of a recapitulation, the tension that would be expected between two conflicting thematic ideas (tonal areas, if you prefer) as they unfold throughout the movement, and particularly in the development section, never really materializes. This placid compositional approach also extends to *As at First*, which Sherkin characterizes as “a broad sonic narrative...traveling through vistas of the impressively grand to the fragilely intimate.” However, the music spends too much of its time in the moment to become a “narrative”—for example, any suggestion of movement in the surface rhythm of “Speed Trace” is defeated by the slowness of the underlying harmonic rhythm. This lack of overarching direction reaches its culmination in *German Promises*. While Sherkin makes no mention of minimalistic influence, there is a prevailing sense of stasis that invokes both that particular style and that of new age music. It is all decidedly diatonic—not that there is anything wrong with diatonicism, but the nearly constant lack of dissonance renders inert any sense of harmonic progression. “Heyday,” for example is entirely diatonic (except for the occasional use of the secondary dominant of the subdominant). Throughout these movements, dissonances are usually introduced by chords of the added second or added sixth, which quickly lose their dissonant value.

Sherkin is a capable pianist, particularly where his music calls upon the creation of harmonic conglomerates. His technique favors the style of music that he has written, with few colorations that stand out. There is also a homogeneity in the technical aspects of the recording that underplays the emphasis of individual notes and harmonies, so that what Sherkin seems to want to achieve (“blurring epochs and historical lineage”) actually takes place.

The notes that accompany the disc may be essential for the listener to understand what the composer is trying to achieve. Unfortunately, there are attempts at imagery that are difficult to comprehend; phrases such as “the traveler might wish to reconcile their [*sic*] experience, weighing promised truths against startling new realities” do not add much clarity.

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