

Songs of the Bubble Ring: Songs by John Greer and Clifford Crawley. Jane Leibel, soprano, John Greer, piano, with Vernon Regehr, cello, Sean Rice, clarinet, Michelle Cheramy, flute and piccolo, Frank Fusari, bass, and Rob Power, percussion. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Centaur CRC 3138, 2011. 1 compact disc (68:58). Contents: *Palm Court Songs of the Bubble Ring; A Sarah Binks Songbook (The Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan) / John Greer – When Soft Voices Die; Seven Stevie Smith Songs; The Sounds of Many Waters – Twelve (very) short songs for Soprano, Flute, Percussion and String Bass / Clifford Crawley.* Price: \$7.99 at Amazon.com

This album presents five song cycles by Canadian composers John Greer and Clifford Crawley. The soprano, Jane Leibel, specifically chose these composers, for their expertise in vocal writing. Each composer has on occasion used parody or quotation of existing music to make it relevant in a new way for present-day listeners. That aspect is revealed frequently in the works selected.

The three central cycles for voice and piano are framed by two others that require varied chamber music groups. The first, *Palm Court Songs of the Bubble Ring* (1991), uses selected passages from Dennis Lee's poetry collection, *The Difficulty of Living on Other Planets* (1987). Greer originally created this cycle for the Toronto-based Amici Trio with voice. The Trio, which consists of piano, clarinet and cello, has strongly supported the work of Canadian composers.

Greer states in the liner notes that he drew inspiration from the range of music performed at the Palm Court in the Plaza Hotel, New York. There during the sumptuous afternoon tea one can listen to a pianist or a small chamber ensemble intermixing selections from the classics with renditions of popular hits of the day. He felt this approach would be appropriate for setting the texts by Lee who likes to quote from writers he admires or even occasionally appropriates their styles.

Accordingly, the first song of the cycle sets the stage for the stylistic variety of the work. The second, "The Man Who Never Was," is a variation on Mozart's Piano Sonata, K. 576, written over 200 years earlier. Its second variation is marked "fast swing" while the singer uses some jazz scat. The ending of a cakewalk motive links with the previous references to early jazz. Greer points out that "Mr. Green and Ms. Levine" is reminiscent of Schubert's *Shepherd on the Rock* in scoring, with a prominent clarinet solo and with the cello silent. A *Lied* that Greer worked on with Madame Greta Kraus, the vocal coach and harpsichordist, was Schubert's "Das Fischermädchen" which provided the rhythmic inspiration for this song. "When I Went Up to Ottawa" is a satire on Brian Mulroney, based on fragments of the Canadian and American national anthems. The cello has a beautiful lyrical line in "The Coat" and is an homage to Gabriel Fauré. Written at the height of the Persian Gulf War, "The Rule" deals with wartime

indoctrination in solemn chords and lamenting descending lines. The cycle ends with “The Mermaid Banquet,” a scherzo that contains references to Haydn’s music as well as the ball scene from Verdi’s *La Traviata*.

A Sarah Binks Songbook (1988) has become a favorite among recitalists with its delightful texts by Paul Hiebert, writing as the voice of the supposedly Saskatchewan-based Sarah Binks. Hiebert, a chemistry professor at the University of Manitoba, wrote *Sarah Binks* in 1947, for which he received the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour. The selected poems display aspects of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, including short lines, unusual syllabic structure and rhyme, unconventional capitalization and punctuation, humour and satire. For live performances, Greer asks the singer to use theatrical gestures such as throwing a kiss, blowing one’s nose, or weeping, to underline aspects of the text.

The first poem, called “Reflections While Translating Heine,” appropriately imitates a Schumann setting of Heine and quotes “Du bist wie eine Blume.” Reminiscences of a Tchaikovsky waltz appear in “Hi Sooky, Ho Sooky.” “Ode to a Star” bears the sub-title “Arioso di camera.” Accordingly, although the harmonies are reminiscent of Hugo Wolf, the vocal line has some early opera references such as the use of recitative. Various echoes of North American popular musics appear in “The Song of the Chore,” while “Elegy to a Calf” is a *siciliana* written in Handelian style. “Square Dance” evokes the vibrant fiddle style of the Canadian Prairies. It specifically quotes “Whiskey Before Breakfast,” a tune attributed to the Manitoba Métis fiddler, Andy DeJarlis.

In *When Soft Voices Die* (1985) Crawley used texts by Lisa March, one of his former students. Sparse but effective piano parts underline the evocative words. A persistent ostinato appears in the opening “Listen” while a waltz idiom accompanies “A Child in All Did Softly Call.” “Wisps of Sound” uses a different metre for the voice line from that of the piano to create a fascinating layered rhythmic texture. An ostinato underlies the words in “Heart a Hollow Vessel” while silences in either piano or voice convey the sense of transitory existence in “The Rainbow.”

For *Seven Stevie Smith Songs* (1997) Crawley picked a variety of poems by Smith and then carefully constructed an overall structure with appropriate accompaniments. “Progression,” the central march of the cycle, is based on a transformed version of “British Grenadiers,” the anonymous song/marching tune that first appeared in print around 1750. Two short poems, “Some Are Born” and “From the Greek,” provide the second and sixth movements. Recurring large chords in the third song, “November,” are balanced with persistent eighth-note running passages under the text for the fifth song, “Coeur simple.” The outer songs, “A Dream of Comparison,” and “Not Waving but Drowning,” are through composed. The piano figures and harmonic relationships provide cohesion for the cycle as bookends.

The Sounds of Many Waters (2004) draws from texts that refer to the sea. Crawley utilizes extracts from poetry of Gray, Waller, Chesterton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Fitzgerald, Masfield, Tennyson, Byron, and Milton. In this setting, the soprano collaborates with a flutist, bass player, and percussionist. The latter plays thirteen different devices including a garbage can full of noisy objects that is emptied at the end of the fifth selection, an instrumental hornpipe entitled "A Jollyrodgered Shantisea." Two handmade Noah bells of India are heard in the final song, "The Rising World." The soprano is called upon to use a rainstick at the conclusion of the eighth song, "Earth and Ocean."

This intriguing and effective score ends a fine presentation of five strong Canadian song cycles. The soprano has a particular gift for bringing out the theatrical aspects. With Greer at the piano, we can be assured that these performances reflect his wishes in his own works. However, it seemed to this listener that the Crawley cycles with piano had not quite achieved the full realization of interpretative possibilities. Overall the recorded sound is excellent although this listener felt that the dynamic range of the voice seemed to be leveled somewhat. For example, in the song, "A Dream of Comparison," Crawley wrote dynamics in the vocal part ranging from *fortissimo* to *piano*, and even *sotto voce*. On the recording it seemed to be more in the mid-range of these dynamics throughout. The composers provide notes for their respective works, but texts of the songs are not included.

Elaine Keillor
Carleton University