

**Nebula.** Heather Schmidt, piano. Toronto: Centrediscs CMCCD 19613, 2013. Compact disc: 53:03. Contents: *Silver Tides* (7:03) – *Elektra's Tanz* (15:10) – *Serenity* (3:19) – *Night Rainbow* (6:37) – *Twelve for Ten: Prelude* (4:02) – *Twelve for Ten: Fugue* (3:08) – *Shimmer* (3:27) – *Nebula* (10:06) – *Moon Cove* (5:11).

*Nebula* is a recording of piano works composed and performed by Heather Schmidt (born 1974). During her career, Schmidt has achieved recognition and awards both as a pianist and as a composer. For example, she was first-prize winner as a pianist in the 2001 Eckhardt-Gramatté National Music Competition; subsequently she was commissioned to write the test piece (*Night Rainbow*, which is included on this disc) for the 2007 Competition. In the notes that accompany the disc, she describes her experience of a composer-pianist as a “special and unique thrill” that has offered to her the opportunity to portray the music exactly as she envisioned it. Thus, while others may and do perform her compositions, these can be seen as definitive performances.

The nine selections presented here date from 2003 through 2012, providing nearly a ten-year cross-section of her style. It is clear that Schmidt established her compositional voice early in her career, a voice that is based upon an intimate knowledge of the capabilities of the piano as an instrument, and the pianist as a performer. Her expressed hope is that the listener finds the music “dramatic, lyrical, moving, and satisfying.”

Lyricism is most noticeable in *Silver Tides* (2008) and *Moon Cove* (2012). The latter was originally scored for bassoon and piano, so melodic phrases are abundant and audible, although occasionally more covered by the surrounding piano texture in this transcription than the original bassoon lines presumably would have been. *Silver Tides* is harmonically staid, with brief moments that are reminiscent of Debussy’s sonorities; *Moon Cove* is equally sedate, with a full two minutes of B-flat harmony at the beginning before there is any harmonic progression.

*Elektra's Tanz* (2009) is the longest work on the disc, and takes its inspiration (and some motivic material) from Richard Strauss’s opera. The notes state that “the work is dramatic and filled with intense, repetitive dance-like energy....” In general, though, the concept of dance in this work is stylized in a very free manner, with frequent variations in tempo and intensity; faster and established tempi are heard during the first fast section of the work, then again as the work moves toward its ending, but the extended sections of slower tempi in free rhythm tend to dissipate any rhythmic energy.

*Serenity*, from 2005, is a compact ternary form. In order to evoke the sense of serenity, Schmidt uses a variety of sonorities based on open fifths; the coloring provided by her simultaneous use of



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high and low registers contributes to the spaciousness that she is evincing. The dynamic levels are surprisingly more robust than the title might suggest.

Written as a competition test piece, *Night Rainbow* provides a number of challenges for the performer. It is one of the more dissonant works on the disc, with occasional hints of Ginastera's harmonic usage. Rhythmically, the "recitative without metre" near the beginning, and the vacillating activity toward the ending, provide interpretive challenges for the pianist with respect to sustaining the structural tension.

*Twelve for Ten*, a prelude and fugue written in 2007 in honour of Glenn Gould, is constructed around a G-E-G-D motive. The prelude relies on the open, sonorous approach heard elsewhere on the disc (described thus: "the focus is on the piano itself"). The fugue begins with an interesting and forward-moving subject that sustains rigorous contrapuntal discipline throughout the exposition and on to the middle of the movement; however, Schmidt breaks this intensity off (described as "the fugue gradually dissolves"), and brings back the redolent style of the *Prelude*.

The remaining two works, *Shimmer* (2003) and the album's title work, *Nebula* (2006), show a preoccupation with piano sonority. The shorter *Shimmer* spends most of its time in the upper register of the piano, with rhythmic murmuring added to inject interest. Like *Night Rainbow*, *Nebula* is also a competition test piece, and therefore presents a similar approach. For example, the "recitative without metre" of the former is replicated by the "spacious, timeless quality of the opening" of the latter. As this work approaches its conclusion, more interest is generated by increased rhythmic activity and dissonance.

As the titles of these works might indicate, the composer's focus is on the atmospheric capabilities of the piano rather than tightness of architecture; as such, the intent to be evocative leads to a use of sonorities that could well be described as "satisfying." The gesture-pause rhetorical style that is so prevalent among contemporary composers is frequently evident on this disc; thus, there are times when the hesitant rhythm creates difficulties in sustaining any structural tension and halts the development of longer lines. The harmonic vocabulary is strongly tonal in its conception; there are brief moments of tension created by foreground neighbour-tone dissonance and middle-ground modality, but they generally resolve to tonal centers that are prolonged. Two other factors reinforce the stolidity of the harmony: the gravity of the slow harmonic rhythm; and the extended use of pedal tones that reduce upper-register dissonance to a surface phenomenon.

The sound quality of this album is certainly of the highest order, given the warm resonance of the Sony Pictures Scoring Stage in Los Angeles, the deep and rich colors of the Steinway piano, and the exceptional pianistic skills of Schmidt. For those wanting a listening experience that focuses on the sonorous, this composer-pianist's work serves as a fine example.

*Jon Gonder*  
*SUNY Geneseo*