

OPERA NEWS

AXELROD: "The Heart Revived"

CD Bentley; Ramsay; Axelrod, Ostermiller, piano; Ensemble Nouvelle Époque, Axelrod. Texts and translations. Innova 949



LAWRENCE AXELROD is a

Chicago-based composer whose fresh and distinctive music deserves to be more widely known. The centerpiece vocal work on this disc, *Night of Stars*, was written for the composer's longtime friend and collaborator Liz Norman, with a text of Axelrod's own creation (his first, according to the notes). The emotionally turbulent harmonic language hovers tantalizingly on the porous border between tonality and atonality, and the work successfully reflects an "interpersonal and superpersonal connection," with an accompanying deep relationship to nature. The swooping, upwardly sequencing orchestral figure

that recurs is an excellent depiction of a shimmering sky full of shooting stars. Mezzo Julia Bentley's velvety voice trembles with urgent feeling.

The other vocal work, *Saisons*, uses four of German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's lesser known French poems. The first one, "Sa Nuit d'Été," has the same passionate urgency of *Night of Stars*, propelled by a hard-driving orchestral accompaniment characterized by repeated staccato interjections. Scott Ramsey's clarion tenor reflects the fiery summer passion. "Feu d'Automne" is calmer (and mostly in Bb major), but still fraught. It segues naturally to "Vergers No. 47," which describes the "united silence of winter," spare and unsettled. The last song, "Printemps," starts a cappella, with interspersed orchestral flourishes gradually taking over and expressing the rejuvenation spring brings. Ramsay again matches the orchestral excitement generated by the prospect of spring resuscitating itself, and ends on a ringing high Bb ("while we hurry ourselves toward infinity").

This disc also features three impressive works for solo piano, with Axelrod as soloist on two. *Love Letters*, in five short movements, features piquant harmonies reminiscent of Prokofiev's *Visions*

fugitives, plus artfully deployed musical silence. In the imaginative *Four Postcards*, the effective use of extended techniques (such as inside-the-piano plucking) and unusual textures conjures exotic locales. *Common Threads*, which reflects the author's experience viewing the AIDS Memorial Quilt, is given a sparkling performance by pianist Marcus Ostermiller. The piece has structural echoes of *Pictures at an Exhibition*: the experience of examining individual panels one at a time emerges as the composer intended. The disc opens with *Pos Metaphonos* ("constant gradual change" in ancient Greek), a singularly memorable bass clarinet concerto in one movement, with wild and exciting instrumental writing that swirls around the lyrical solo part, played here masterfully by J. Laurie Bloom. The Ensemble Nouvelle Époque, led by Axelrod, gives what must be definitive performances of the vocal cycles and the bass clarinet piece. —*Joshua Rosenblum*