

Fanfare Magazine – Singing in the Dead of Night

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Marking its 10th release on the Cedille label with this disc (*Singing in the Dead of the Night*), the Chicago-based new music sextet Eighth Blackbird continues its sterling work for music of today. The presentation format of this disc mirrors that of the premiere of Lang's *these broken wings*; the individual movements of that piece are interspersed with the pieces by Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe. All of the pieces take their titles from lines in the 1968 Beatles song *Blackbird*.

The idea of creating a kaleidoscopic patchwork of music by several composers that form a whole is a thread of the work of the composers here, culminating in their opera *The Carbon Copy Building*, in which different scenes from Ben Katcher's libretto were allocated to different composers, with the whole, as Lang puts it, "like a mosaic." A similar principle operates here, with Lang's *these broken wings* at the center. There is also a visual component to this that is lost in a sound-only compact disc: the players, who apparently habitually play from memory despite exhibiting a penchant for cripplingly difficult new music, move to a choreography by Susan Marshall that we at home are sadly denied.

Very early this year, in those halcyon days when we could all go to concerts, David Lang's *Prisoner of the State* received its European premiere at London's Barbican Hall, performed by the BBC Symphony, the BBC Singers, and students from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (which is situated literally next to the Barbican) conducted by Ilan Volkov. That was January 11, and part of the Barbican's celebrations of Beethoven 250; the world premiere had been with the New York Philharmonic on June 6, 2019. A contemporary retelling of Beethoven's *Fidelio* (and proof positive that the issues raised by that opera remain just as relevant today), it received a mixed reception in the press. Having attended (and reported on) that opera, and having experienced this disc, my allegiances lie firmly with the defenders.

The first part of Lang's *these broken wings* begins with an active cello sliding around in insectile, quasi-buzzing fashion (the composer describes it as a "heavy metal-esque cello line"; responses include an active violin that at times seems to reference Irish fiddle music. Gestural, imaginative and sometimes sparkling, this is a gripping soundscape. The somewhat Minimalist *the light of the dark* by Michael Gordon that follows immediately is bright and deliberately somewhat chaotic, the result on the listener a bit like the children's game of being blindfolded then spun around. Dizzily exuberant, this is music that is perfect for Eighth Blackbird. Its fast and furious nature demands an exact edge to the performance, and that is exactly what it receives here, with Jen Thomson's clarinet perhaps a first among equals in terms of scintillating virtuosity.

The second part of *these broken wings*, designated as "part 2 (passacaille)," is an elusive, hyper-beautiful moment of frozen time. The performance challenge here is different: control of instruments is paramount (just the slightest wavering on a sustained note spells curtains for the atmosphere). The metallic sounds are things being dropped by the players who are not playing at that point; this is spooky rather than interruptive.

The name Julia Woolf is new to me. Her *singing in the dead of night* intends to set up a darkness and silence, a solitary space out of which that creative inspiration comes—in the composer's own words, "the still and surreal nighttime experience of being the only one awake." Here we hear the sandpaper

sounds. Rather nicely, Wolfe splits the types of inspiration into two, the rapid, virtuoso parts being a response to Eighth Blackbird's infinite capabilities, and the held-breath quietness ones for choreographer Susan Marshall, whom Wolfe memorably describes as "thoughtful and exquisite." This is a major piece of music that fits perfectly within the remit for this album/experience, but which would also stand firmly on its own two feet outside of it. For a compositional ear as fine as Wolfe's, one needs not only first-tier performers (as here) but a first-rate recording, too; and here it feels as if we can hear everything, in a beautiful perspective and acoustic. The members of Eighth Blackbird, as everywhere, throw themselves fully into the piece, not just the notes, but the ethos. They seem to understand this newly minted music on a profound level. After this, I am itching to hear Julia Wolfe's Anthracite Fields, recorded by Bang on a Can for the Cantaloupe label and reviewed by James H. North in Fanfare 39:4.

The third and final part of these broken wings carries a parenthesized "learn to fly" as part of its title. The music dances impulsively—as Lang says, "in the hope that it would encourage the musicians to do so as well." It is an energized as well as energizing way to close a most memorable experience.

There is a sense of unquenchable curiosity and vivacity from both the composers and performers that pervades this disc. The superb recording was made in the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago by producer Elaine Martone and engineer Bill Maylone.