

## **H. ADAMS Piano Études: Part II • Thomas Otten (pn) • ALBANY 1519 (64:51)**

As far as I can tell from the Fanfare Archive, the present CD is the first devoted to the music of Cleveland born H. Leslie Adams. He studied under Herbert Elwell and Joseph Wood at Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Leon Dallin Long Beach State University, and Marshall Barnes Ohio State University, and also worked privately with Robert Starer and Eugene O'Brien. Adams has seen his music performed by a number of major orchestras, including those of Cleveland, Indianapolis, Buffalo, and Prague, and just this year, he received the Cleveland Arts Prize Life Achievement Award, so he is hardly an unknown entity. He has written ballets; operas; sonatas for horn, violin, cello; and much other music. Thus, this apparent first CD devoted to his work seems overdue, especially given the fine music it contains.

Adams writes in an unabashedly tonal style, with the music as warm and ingratiating as is his smile in the photo in the booklet of the CD. The works on this CD are not the first of his music I've heard. I own a private CD containing his very fine Piano Concerto (subtitled "Cityscape"), a work that certainly deserves a commercial recording. The Études under review all utilize key signatures, and are drawn from a set of 26, most of which are in different keys (there being only 24 major and minor keys). Heard on this CD are the final 14 études of the set, which comprise part two of the work, which occupied the composer over a 10 year period. Adams describes the process of composition for him as "pulling out what's inside," and so on the basis of these lovely works, I infer a man who is a warm and caring individual.

The mood of the pieces ranges from the heroic opening Étude in E Major, permeated by a vigorous rhythmic figure, to the much more freely rhapsodic second piece in A $\flat$ , with its nostalgic final ascending figure. Even freer in form is the Third Étude in D $\sharp$  Minor, which draws upon dramatic gestures before it settles into a lovely tune with an undulating accompaniment. At almost seven minutes, this Étude is the longest of the set. In the B-Major Sixth Étude, Adams is a bit freer in his harmonic shifts, such that the tonal centers wander around a good bit more than those of the other movements, and provide ample evidence of his command of harmony. The eighth of the set, cast in C $\sharp$  Major and one of the faster heard herein, doubtless gives the pianist a real workout with its continually running figuration in this seldom encountered key. Étude 11 in G $\sharp$  Minor is probably my favorite of the set because of its energetic syncopations and adventurous harmonic treatment. In it, the composer gives the most overt obeisance to his African-American roots, and to his distinguished predecessors, William Grant Still and William Dawson. The final three études are all transcriptions of pop songs (with lyrics) that he had written many years before. Their indebtedness to American popular song culture is consequently more pronounced, but they do fit in remarkably well with the other études. My wife, a musician herself, happened to walk into my office while these song transcriptions were playing and inquired as to the composer of "this wonderful music." She is now also an admirer of Adams.

Pianist Thomas Otten brings a most sensitive touch to the exquisite melodies and harmonies of these pieces, caressing and lingering over phrases where appropriate, and bringing considerable drama to the more vigorous passages, such as the exciting conclusion of the Ninth Étude in E Minor. In some places he utilizes a touch more pedal than seems appropriate to me, but I suspect that this will not bother most listeners, and apparently did not the composer. The recorded sound produced by engineer Mark Manning produces a rather distant perspective what would be heard perhaps halfway back in the concert hall but it is pleasing throughout, and quite appropriate to the style of the music.

Consequently, this CD is recommended to those who like Romantic contemporary music which, even if not path breaking, will please most music lovers. Most of these pieces are possessed of a soothing quality that would help a listener unwind after a hectic day. I had just such a day yesterday, so this disc was just what the doctor ordered. David DeBoor Canfield

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