



Gregory Berg

Take Them Along, Our Songs—Robert Edwin Sings Crosby & Edwin Songs. Robert Edwin, baritone; Paul Presto, Jr., keyboards. (PasulStreetMusic.com; 41:20)

“The Tunnel,” “Holidays In My Heart,” “Like The Wind,” “Have To Let You Go,” “My New York,” “Nothing To Win,” “What Difference Is A Difference?” “Goin’ To The World Today,” “Hanging On A Habit,” “So Much To Be,” “Soft Rhythm Man,” “Take Them Along, My Songs,” “Mycyclesong.”

Any reader of the *Journal of Singing* is surely aware of the impressive legacy of Robert Edwin, one of its most respected and prolific contributors. As a teacher, he has been a leading pedagogue in the field of CCM (Contemporary Commercial Music), as well as an exceptionally effective teacher of young singers. A gifted and versatile singer himself, Edwin has built a rich and impressive career with little regard for traditional boundaries or restrictions. As his website proudly (and rightly) proclaims, his résumé ranges from Bach cantatas to rock music and almost everything in between.

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What readers may not know is that Robert Edwin is also a skilled composer who has been writing music for nearly a half century in an astonishing plethora of styles. His primary partner over all those years has been lyricist and good friend Richard E. Crosby. Sadly, Mr. Crosby died on April 16, 2016, at the age of 71, so *Take Them Along, Our Songs* is now a memorial tribute to this gifted writer. Edwin recounts that the two of them met back in the late 1960s when Crosby taught poetry at a middle school where Edwin’s wife taught English. When he learned that her husband was a singer and aspiring songwriter, Crosby asked her to show him some of his poems that might have potential as song lyrics. Edwin was quite impressed, and thus began both a friendship and artistic partnership that only grew stronger over the succeeding decades.

The thirteen songs on this disk represent the astonishing breadth of this team’s artistic legacy, but what is just as astonishing is the vocal versatility that Robert Edwin demonstrates. Of all the adjectives that one might use to describe what he accomplishes here, the best is “chameleonic.” One would be hard pressed to find another singer anywhere who is capable of moving between such drastically different styles with this kind of pinpoint accuracy and assurance. Edwin flips faultlessly from semiclassical to folk to country to rock, and manages not to sound the least bit self-conscious as he does it. It is an amazing *tour de force*, and the fact that he just celebrated his 70th birthday makes it an even more impressive achievement.

As for the songs themselves, they are a delightful romp through a wide range of styles that leave one exhilarated and exhausted (in the best sense

of the word). Many of them feel almost eerily familiar, so closely do they resemble extant songs of the same ilk. An especially good example is “My New York,” an ebullient anthem in honor of America’s largest and greatest city. There are times when one would swear that you’re hearing a long lost variation on the opening song to Leonard Bernstein’s “New York, New York” from *On the Town*, while other moments bring to mind Kander and Ebb’s equally iconic “New York, New York.” But somehow this does not amount to artistic embezzlement at all, but rather as a good-hearted tribute. And if there ever was a city that merited yet another song in its honor, it’s New York City. What matters most, however, is that this is a terrific song with fresh, catchy lyrics and music to match. One common trait through all of these songs is how Edwin’s music always plays a fully supportive role by enhancing the texts without overshadowing them. Some of these songs have a fair amount of repetition, as in “The Tunnel” that opens the disk, but the musical ideas themselves never outstay their welcome. That says something about how well conceived those ideas are as well as how nicely executed they are. One also appreciates how Edwin’s terrific sense of humor repeatedly reveals itself, especially in “What Difference is a Difference,” which combines traces of Sondheim, Noël Coward, and W. S. Gilbert, while remaining uniquely Edwin/Crosby. This is also the one time on the disk where we are treated to the more classically inclined side of Edwin’s vocalism. It’s astonishing how the composer/singer of that is also responsible for “Goin’ To The World Today,” a country ballad in which Edwin manages to transform his sound into what sounds like the singing of a

aged, grizzled cowboy with a voice that nearly reaches the bottom of the keyboard.

All in all, this disk offers up a wonderful kaleidoscope of styles that also serves as an important reminder that the combination of a well founded technique with boundless musical imagination makes for an unbeatable combination.

and he'll be mine—love songs by gay american composers. Dennis Tobenski, tenor; Marc Peloquin, piano. (Perfect Enemy Records; 53:30)

Chester Biscardi: *Modern Love Songs*: "What a Coincidence," "I Wouldn't Know About That," "Someone New," "Now You See It, Now You Don't," "At Any Given Moment." David Del Tredici: "Here" (*Gay Life*). Zachary Wadsworth: *Three Lullabies*: "Rockaby, Lullaby," "You spotted snake . . ." "Under the silver moon." Darien Shulman: *Three Poems of Thomas Moore*: "If Thou'lt Be Mine," "An Argument," "Come Rest in This Bosom." Dennis Tobenski: *And He'll Be Mine*: "Braw, Braw Lads o' Galla Water," "Craigieburn Wood," "Him That's Far Away," "Lament," "Bonie Dundee," "The Gallant Weaver," "John Anderson, My Jo."

This is a deeply compelling collection of superbly crafted songs that all happen to have been written by gay composers. In this day and age, that might seem like a fairly unremarkable fact hardly worth mentioning, let alone trumpeting as the headline on the cover of a CD. Then again, there continue to be reversals in the ongoing struggle for LGBT equality, and perhaps that is more than enough reason for recordings like this to be released. At any rate, there is no ques-

tion whatsoever about the excellence of these songs or about the performances which they receive. Tenor Dennis Tobenski is a skillful and sensitive singer who shapes phrases and renders text with expert care. The voice itself is quite attractive if occasionally prone to slight nasality. Pianist Marc Peloquin plays flawlessly; his superb work makes an immeasurable contribution to the beauty of these performances.

Without a doubt the finest songs in this collection are the five *Modern Love Songs* by Chester Biscardi, composed between 1997 and 2002 to texts by William Zinsser. Composer and writer first met during jury duty, of all things, and their conversations during their break time eventually revealed their mutual love for and interest in popular song. That was when they decided that they would collaborate, and the results were spectacularly successful as well as a bit surprising. Zinsser, who died in 2015, was a highly acclaimed journalist and writer of nonfiction who is probably best remembered as the author of *On Writing Well*, an indispensable guide for several generations of writers, would-be and otherwise. He may not have spent much of his public professional life writing song lyrics, but he did plenty of such work in his college days, and he wrote about music with discernment and passion. (Of the 18 nonfiction books he authored, his personal favorite was *The Great American Songwriters and Their Songs*, as fine a book on the topic as any ever written.) He was also an able and enthusiastic jazz pianist who only began performing in public when he was in his 60s. And his collaboration with Biscardi may have been at least part of the inspiration for his 2002 musical revue *What's the Point?*, for which he crafted both lyrics and music.

Biscardi and Zinsser decided from the start that they wanted the songs they were going to write to fall somewhere between the worlds of art songs and cabaret songs, and that is precisely what they created. They fall easily upon the ear and are entirely accessible and comfortable, but there is a level of complexity and craftsmanship that elevates them beyond the realm of popular song. Biscardi makes special note of the asymmetrical construction of the lyrics and the sophisticated use of unconventional rhyme that seem to have inspired the composer to produce some of the most arresting music of his career. The opening song, "What a Coincidence," is probably the most conventional of the five, but it's still a masterful creation that proves the power of understatement when it's done just right. "I Wouldn't Know About That" explores how real life love does not always align with the kind of love fancifully described or depicted in poetry and film. It's a complicated text but Biscardi's setting is breathtaking for its natural ease, and it also manages to soften the sarcastic edge of the text, ever so slightly. "Someone New" is a breathtaking depiction of how someone can find himself utterly transformed in the act of falling in love. "He chased away the other me," says the singer, "and brought in someone new." Beneath the languid surface of the song is a quietly churning passion generated by Biscardi's brilliant use of harmonic tension. It's nothing less than a masterpiece. "Now You See It, Now You Don't" finds the singer lightheartedly trying to come to terms with emotional abandonment, but we can sense the real pain behind the brave facade. The set ends in stunning fashion with "At Any Given Moment," in which the lyrics suggest that we discard the question "How

do I love thee?" in favor of "When do I love thee?" The answer to that question is a radiant outpouring of passion and devotion: "At any given moment . . . of any given hour . . . of any given day . . . you are somewhere in my heart." Those are words of breathtaking beauty even apart from Biscardi's gorgeous musical setting of them. It is safe to say that in the last half century, no more beautiful love song has been composed than this.

The rest of this disk also offers up compelling riches. The most familiar of the remaining composers will be David Del Tredici, whose many groundbreaking works include *Final Alice*, that famous piece that found soprano Barbara Hendricks singing into a megaphone. "Here" is from his work *Gay Life* and features just the kind of bracing, impactful music we have come to expect from this maverick. Zachary Wadsworth's exquisite *Three Lullabies* feature texts by Josiah Gilbert Holland, William Shakespeare, and Lord Alfred Tennyson. At a glance, they would seem to be the most "off-topic" of anything on this recording, but Tobenski's liner notes give them proper context. Beyond the more conventional picture of a parent lulling a child to sleep, Tobenski writes that "below this simple and tender surface lies a more complicated emotional landscape, steeped in parents' anxiety about the safety of their child in a dangerous world." That frames these lullabies in a very different light and makes them an essential element in this collection. Darien Schulman's *Three Poems of Thomas Moore* are beautiful as well, and the tenor scales their challenging melodic lines with impressive ease. It's no surprise to read that Tobenski and Peloquin commissioned these works; they suit them perfectly. Tobenski's

own contribution to the collection is the title work, which features his setting of eight different poems by Robert Burns. He has taken texts originally conceived to be sung by a woman expressing love for a man, and in doing so has created what in his mind was and remains "a gay song cycle." On the other hand, Tobenski says that the folk song tradition allows for all kinds of crossover between genders and he says he would welcome anybody of any gender or orientation to perform these songs. Expertly crafted, yet true to the folk tradition, they yield some of the most poignant moments in this entire collection.

Mark Abel: *Home is a Harbor- Opera in Three Acts. The Palm Trees Are Restless—Five Poems of Kate Gale.*

Jamie Chamberlin, Ariel Pisturino, Hila Plitmann, soprano; Janelle DeStefano, mezzo soprano; Jon Lee Keenan, tenor; Babatund Akinboboye, E. Scott Levin, baritone; Carver Cossey, bass; Tali Tadmor, piano; Benjamin Makino, conductor; La Brea Sinfonietta. (Delos DE 3495; 77:43, 47:03)

Home is a Harbor. The Palm Trees Are Restless: "The Storm Drain," "Los Angeles," "Crater Light," "Shura," "The Great Divorce."

For Verdi, it was a promising but raw work called *Oberto*. For his German rival Wagner, it was the intriguing if nearly incoherent *Die Feen*. For Puccini, it was the rough and only fitfully inspired *Le villi*. These were the first operas of three of history's greatest operatic geniuses, and they were a far cry from the assured masterworks that these composers would eventually go on to create within a few years time. It underscores just how challenging it

has been for even these great composers to master the genre of opera, which in many ways is the most extravagant and complex of all art forms.

This is good to keep in mind in assessing the first opera of Mark Abel, a skilled and assured composer of songs. In the liner notes for this release, Delos executive Carol Rosenberger waxes rhapsodic about what Abel has been able to do on the larger canvas of opera. It's hard to imagine that she is referring to *Home Is a Harbor*, an intermittently interesting but deeply flawed work that irritates more than engrosses. As is the case with so many new operas, its fatal flaw is its amateurish libretto by Abel himself. The basic storyline is simply too complicated to be an effective opera libretto. It's a coming of age story for two sisters who venture out from the relative safety and comfort of their small hometown to seek success in two different cities. By the time we're done, we've touched on such issues as homelessness, the war in Afghanistan, the financial crisis, graft in the art world, and the angst and alienation of life in modern America. Abel seems to have made the mistaken assumption that the more expansive framework of an opera must be filled from corner to corner with a plethora of different ideas and themes. Anyone deeply versed in how great operas are constructed will tell you that this is a recipe for artistic disaster. Beyond the issues with the storyline itself, much of the actual text lacks the emotional weight that cries out to be sung. Perhaps it would work better as a Hallmark Channel TV movie, but it simply fails to take wing as an opera libretto. Abel's score is a bit better than its libretto, but it, too, is rife with problems. It has a lurching, ill-at-ease quality, especially when Abel falls into a tedious pattern of

shifting the timbre of the accompaniment from character to character. It's a jarring and ultimately exhausting effect. Most regrettably and surprisingly, Abel's gift for setting text fails him again and again. Conversational texts sound clunky and clumsy or overblown and overwrought—or both. The best thing about the work is its intriguing and colorful accompaniment, which is scored for small chamber orchestra. Abel obviously knows something about combining instrumental colors in arresting ways. It leaves one very hungry to hear more of this sort of thing from him. In fact, the best passages from this opera, such as its atmospheric prelude or the radiant duet sung by the sisters to close the work, point to Abel's potential as an opera composer: one only wishes that more of that potential had been realized here.

The work that deserves to be heard is what takes up most of the second disk. *The Palms Trees Are Restless* is a setting of five poems by Los Angeles writer Kate Gale, one of the most gifted poets before the public today. The texts are a discerning reflection on modern life, and they seem to have inspired Abel to the summit of his powers. These are complex poems replete with sharply shifting moods and flavors, and in the hands of a lesser composer we could have been left with a chaotic jumble. Abel has found a way to harness and embrace the restless energy of these texts with masterful assurance and ingenuity. The set opens with what is surely the loveliest song ever written about a storm drain, and it treats us to the composer's unerring ear for color. It's followed by "Los Angeles," a lengthy and complicated text that captures the unique and endlessly varied character of the city, its inhabitants, and what

life is like there. Gale's text is a gauntlet of wildly divergent experiences and emotions, and Abel's music brings it all thrillingly to life. "Crater Light" is a sardonic expression of what it feels like to be abandoned by one's lover; the title refers to how someone nursing such hurt is likely to view even something as lovely as moonlight as nothing but an aching reminder of the pleasures that someone else is enjoying. "Shura" is a song of haunting and mysterious beauty that also demonstrates the profound impact one can achieve by blending contrasting textures in telling ways. The set ends with quite a bang, courtesy of a hectoring song titled "The Great Divorce" that literally gives us one side of an angry conversation, as though we were eavesdropping as someone engaged in a furious phone call. Kate Gale's text is powerful in and of itself, but with Abel's musical setting it gains even more visceral impact.

If there is anything about these songs that deserves criticism, it is the composer's predilection for setting certain moments in what amounts to the vocal stratosphere; the effect is undeniably exciting but in some cases the words are rendered all but nonexistent. Fortunately for Abel, he has a soprano who manages to cope with this punishing tessitura with surprising success. Soprano Hila Plitmann is to be commended for her exciting and expressive singing, and Tali Tadmor partners her at the piano with impressive aplomb. Full texts are included for the songs as well as the opera.

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Potpourri, and a daily interview program called *The Morning Show*. A church organist since the age of eight, he serves Holy Communion Lutheran Church as Minister of Music. He graduated from Luther College (Decorah, Iowa) in 1982 and earned his master's degree in vocal performance from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. During his undergraduate and graduate years, he earned four first-place finishes in state and regional NATS competitions; he also won first place in the District Metropolitan Opera Auditions and was an apprentice with the prestigious Lyric Opera Center for American Artists in Chicago. Since moving to southeastern Wisconsin, Berg has been an active soloist with area orchestras and wind ensembles. He is also a composer of church music with two contemporary liturgies and three commissioned hymns to his credit.

Besides the Autumn poets sing,
A few prosaic days
A little this side of the snow
And that side of the Haze —

A few incisive mornings —
A few Ascetic eves —
Gone — Mr. Bryant's "Golden
Rod" —
And Mr Thomson's "sheaves."

Still, is the bustle in the brook —
Sealed are the spicy valves —
Mesmeric fingers softly tough
The eyes of many Elves —

Perhaps a squirrel may remain —
My sentiments to share —
Grant me, Oh Lord, sunny mind —
Thy windy will to bear!

Emily Dickinson,
"Besides the Autumn poets sing"