Ned Rorem - On An Echoing Road (2009)

01 – Early in the morning 02 – Are you the new person drawn toward me? 03 – Rain in Spring 04 – For Susan 05 – Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening 06 – Jeanie with the light brown hair 07 – To a young girl 08 – Catullus: On the burial of his brother 09 – Requiescat 10 – I will always love you 11 – That shadow, my likeness 12 – On an echoing road 13 – I strolled across an open field 14 – Alleluia 15 – Little Elegy 16 – Sometimes with one I love 17 – Hymn for Evening 18 – Orchids 19 – On a singing girl 20 – Now sleeps the crimson petal 21 – What if some little pain 22 – Look down, fair moon 23 – The Rainbow 24 – Do I love you more than a day? 25 – Their lonely betters 26 – Do not love too long 27 – Comment on War 28 – The Serpent 29 – Full of life now The Prince Consort: – Alisdair Hogarth - artistic director, piano – Anna Leese - soprano – Jennifer Johnston - mezzo-soprano – Andrew Staples - tenor – Tim Mead - countertenor – Jacques Imbrailo - baritone

I first became really aware of the music of Ned Rorem when I bought the marvellous 1999 disc of his songs by Susan Graham and Malcolm Martineau. Since then I've added several more discs of his songs to my collection and several discs of his orchestral and choral music. And the more I've got to know his output the more impressed I am by it. He is a fastidious craftsman with a genuine melodic gift and an often-intriguing harmonic palette. He's composed over 600 songs, I believe, and perhaps his particular success in that genre is down to his ability to unite the attributes I've just mentioned with an evident fine feeling for words - not for nothing have his published diaries been widely acclaimed. In a very brief but gracious preface to a recent printed collection of his songs he writes thus: "Whatever the music may now be worth, I flatter myself that their choice of poetry is quite high class". In my opinion he's unnecessarily self-deprecating about his music, which is consistently fine, and right on the money about the discriminating choice of texts.

I may be wrong but I fancy that this disc may mark the debut on record of The Prince Consort. The Consort is a group of five young singers, brought together by pianist Alisdair Hogarth, their artistic director. All the members of the Consort were students together at London's Royal

College of Music. The fact that a group of talented singers are working together opens up significant recital possibilities for them, I should imagine, in the same way that Graham Johnson and the Songmakers' Almanac collaborated some years ago. The Prince Consort appears to have developed something of an affinity for the music of Ned Rorem and in October 2009, as part of the Oxford Lieder Festival, they gave the European première of Rorem's 1997 collection of thirty-six songs for four singers and piano, Evidence of Things Not Seen. To my great regret I wasn't able to attend that important event. I'm pleased to find that they've included five of the songs from Evidence of Things Not Seen here. I hope that what I trust will be the success of this present CD will give them and Linn Records the encouragement to make a complete recording of that collection for, on the evidence of this disc, a recording of it by The Prince Consort would provide strong competition for the excellent 1998 recording by The New York Festival of Song.

The present programme offers an excellent introduction for anyone coming new to Rorem's songs. A good number are fairly early pieces but there's a judicious leavening of later pieces also. I don't think that the solo recitals by Susan Graham, especially, or by Carole Farley are necessarily displaced. Rather this new disc complements them, but it enjoys an important advantage in that the opportunity to hear several different voices adds to our appreciation of the songs. In that respect it's rather like the extra dimension when one hears Berlioz's Les Nuits d'été sung by several singers rather than by just one.

Collectors may be slightly surprised to see that a counter-tenor features in the programme since that voice is still a comparative rarity in recitals of modern art songs. However, I know of at least one other recording of Rorem songs by a counter-tenor - Brian Asawa's recording of the cycle More Than A Day - and in any event Tim Mead makes a fine contribution and his voice seems to me to be well suited to the songs allotted to him. Indeed, throughout the disc solo songs seem to have been well chosen for the singers to whom they are assigned. If I have a regret it's that we don't get more opportunities to hear baritone Jacques Imbrailo. I don't mean any disrespect to his colleagues but Imbrailo impresses in each of his three solo numbers and I would have welcomed an even greater contribution from him.

He opens the programme auspiciously with a suave rendition of Early in the morning, which Armin Zanner says, in his excellent notes, was composed in 1958, though the music bears the date 1955. It's a wonderful, easeful song, conjuring up mental images of 1950s Parisian café society. Imbrailo's warm, round tone is ideally suited to this song and he delivers its lovely melodic line quite splendidly while Alisdair Hogarth brings out the Ravelian grace in the accompaniment. Later in the recital Imbrailo is equally successful in Rorem's affectionate and inventive arrangement of Stephen Foster's Jeanie with the light brown hair and he's just as impressive in his exuberant account of I strolled across an open field. Incidentally, that's one of the relatively few pieces on the disc that's in a tempo other than moderate or slow.

Tenor Andrew Staples also makes a most effective contribution. His singing in For Susan is clear and poised and shortly afterwards he has a very different song allocated to him in the shape of Catullus: On the burial of His Brother. This is an eloquent elegy by Catullus, the Roman poet of the first century BC, here set in English translation. It's an eloquent song and Staples does it very well, his voice rising to some fine, ringing top notes. I also like his performance of Alleluia. Like Randall Thompson's choral anthem, Rorem sets just the one word. But there similarities end. Where Thompson's piece is broad and prayerful Rorem's bristles with energy - the music is marked 'Fast and somewhat hysterical'. I wouldn't describe Andrew Staples' singing as hysterical - in fact it's excellently controlled - but he brings out all the vitality in the outer sections of the song and is just as effective in the more reflective, slower central section. Near the end of the recital he gives a virtuoso performance of The Serpent. I'm not entirely sure I like this song. The music has a significant dissonance quotient and the melodic line is spikier than I care for but it's a witty creation and Staples gives a super and very characterful performance of it.

Counter-tenor Tim Mead has several solos. I enjoyed That shadow, my likeness, taken from Rorem's Whitman Cantata, in which the 12/8 metre suits the words brilliantly. Sometimes with one I love, another setting of Whitman but from twenty-five years earlier, is a fine song, encompassing significant mood swings in a mere two pages of music. Mead is very convincing. He's also good in the Yeats setting Do not love too long, where the word "he" in the printed text is changed to "she", altering the piece, quite reasonably, into a man's song.

Soprano Anna Leese has several fine songs allotted to her. Her account of the brief but touching Little Elegy is shrewdly positioned in the programme to provide an effective contrast after the exuberance of Alleluia. Rorem's setting of Now sleeps the crimson petal is a world away from some English settings, such as the one by Roger Quilter. Rorem's response to Tennyson's poem is tense and dramatic and Miss Leese communicates the song very effectively. She and Alisdair Hogarth convey the strong atmosphere of this music very well indeed. To Miss Leese falls the very last item in the programme, Full of life now. This is another Whitman setting, dating from 1989. Though written over twenty years ago I did wonder if its inclusion was a little statement on the composer's behalf for even now in his eighty-seventh year he seems to be very active and he has written a new work for The Prince Consort; they will give the première at London's Wigmore Hall later this year.

The one singer I've not yet discussed is mezzo Jennifer Johnston and whilst it's invidious to single out one singer among such an excellent team her singing impressed me most of all. She has a beautifully rounded mezzo voice; the middle and bottom registers are warm and pleasing while the top of her voice is completely secure. Production is even throughout the compass of

the voice and overall her singing makes a most positive impression. I admired very much her account of Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, a song dedicated to Rorem's father. This is the only piece for which the text is not supplied - presumably for copyright reasons. It's the poem by Robert Frost that contains the famous lines 'But I have promises to keep/And miles to go before I sleep'. Further on in the programme Miss Johnston gives a very fine performance of I will always love you. In sinuous melodic line of this song her warm tone is a distinct advantage and her top notes are impressive; she brings off the lovely ending most poetically.

In addition to the solo items there are five pieces that require between two and four singers. These are all taken from Evidence of Things Not Seen and in each instance the singers involved blend their voices most effectively and with evident understanding. This is where one feels the benefit of singers who are used to working as a team rather than just coming together for an occasional performance. For me the stand-out item among the ensemble pieces is the quartet Hymn for Evening, the number that closes the second of the three parts of Evidence of Things Not Seen. Though only four voices are used it offers us a reminder of Rorem's excellence as a writer of choral music. In this performance I loved the quiet fervour of the singing, much of which is unaccompanied, and the 'Amen' with which the quartet ends is exquisite.

This is an exceptionally fine recital. All six performers are evidently fully engaged with Rorem's style and idiom. The standard of the singing is consistently high and the diction is excellent throughout. Rorem's crucially important and often-difficult piano parts are expertly played by Alisdair Hogarth. As we have come to expect from Linn, the sound is clear, truthful and well balanced, providing a very pleasant listening experience.

As I said earlier, some previous Rorem recitals on disc retain their importance, but if you want a single-disc introduction to this very fine and important composer of songs you can't do better than this disc by this fine ensemble. And seasoned Rorem collectors should take note of one further important point. Most of the recordings of Rorem's songs to date have been by American artists. This new disc offers a chance, which should be seized upon, to hear an expert and evidently committed young British team in his music I hope the Linn and The Prince Consort will give us a follow-up to this splendid disc very soon. ---John Quinn, musicweb-international.com

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