

MOMENTS OF ARRIVAL •

Julius P. Williams, cond;
 Linda Lister (sop); Coro Di Praga;
 Prague RSO •
CENTAUR 3456 (65:17)



ROUSSANOVA Moments of Arrival
 MCQUILLAN Poet Song.
 The Long Goodbye
 J. WILLIAMS InEquities In A Society
 QUALLIOTINE Celestial Nights (Part I)
 BURNS The Voyage



Moments of Arrival
 MP3 Music

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The interview that accompanies this review is focused on just one of the composers, Elena Roussanova, but this review rightly focuses on Julius P. Williams, her husband and colleague, and the author of the feast. Williams may be a new name to some readers, but he is hardly new to the music scene. CBS News did a profile on his work back in 1988, when the 35-year-old conductor/composer was engaged in a residency at the University of Vermont to increase awareness of the involvement of African-American musicians in classical music. In that piece, Williams expresses his commitment to the teaching of young musicians, especially the minority students who need encouragement in the field. He also voices an aspiration to conduct the premiere Berlin, New York, or Philadelphia orchestras. He has been wildly successful in his first goal, building a career that has led him, through many achievements, to a faculty position at the prestigious Berklee College of Music. And if the podiums of those three orchestral giants have so far eluded him, it is not a reflection on his talent. He has appeared in front of many fine ensembles in the U.S. and Europe, not least the Dallas Symphony, to general acclaim, and has served as director for fine regional orchestras, opera companies, and festivals. And his music has been performed by the New York Philharmonic, as well as the Cleveland Orchestra, and the Dallas Symphony, among many others.

Those who *have* followed Williams's career will recognize some composers' names above, ones the conductor has championed for years. Lee T. McQuillan, a fellow Hartt School alumnus and fellow faculty participant in the New York State Summer School of the Arts Choral Program, has figured in five of Williams's last nine releases. Here he is represented by two songs on texts by his wife Margaret Carbo. One, *Poet Song*, explores in sound and structure the process of bringing artistic unity out of the chaos of ideas, while *The Long Goodbye* deals in a sense with its antithesis, a dark, if compassionate, meditation on



the dissolution of the intellect under the onslaught of Alzheimer's.

Armand Qualliotine, one of Williams's colleagues at Berklee, and another Hartt School alumnus, has appeared on three previous CDs. *Celestial Nights* is his third chamber orchestra serenade, and part one, in three movements, evokes the emptiness of "Interstellar Space," a "Nova," and a "Binary Star" through open chords and suspensions, tuned percussion, harp, and an expansive harmonic development punctuated with moments of dissonance. Celestial images taken by Hubble, in its slow exploration of the cosmos, come to mind.

Roussanova's work is ripe with lovely unabashedly Romantic melodies, full of nostalgia and reflection, but just as often propelled by lively rhythms. She may be a Russian composer, but this work is delightfully shot through with Americanisms: Copland and Bernstein in Broadway mode are certainly dancing to the music she composes. It is, if I were to choose, the most engagingly written work on the program.

Williams's *InEquities In A Society* strikes a poignant note as well, but to a very different effect. His subject here, in a work subtitled "Ode to Trayvon," is the tragic death of teenager Trayvon Martin. It serves as a threnody to the young man, as a depiction, in a sense, of the events from carefree stroll to violent confrontation, and as a powerful protest against the racial profiling that brought about his death.

Reynard Burns's *The Voyage* is the only work which leaves me ambivalent. The original title was *America Trial and Triumph*, which in some ways suggests Burns's scenario better than the new title. He describes the piece as "a musical depiction of events in history that have forced, and continue to have an impact on, the development and shaping of America's beliefs and goals." To accomplish this, he sets various songs from the Civil Rights movement like *Lift Every Voice* with patriotic songs like *America*, and says, for instance, that he is suggesting the demise of slavery with a sequence of tunes running from *Yankee Doodle*, to bugle calls over

snatches of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* and *The Battle Cry of Freedom*, to *Taps*, to a distorted *Star Spangled Banner*, and then *Dies irae*. There is, of course, more to it than that, and it is an interesting concept, but without the explanation it comes off as a rather eccentric American-tune collage, however congenial it might be and impressive in some of the unexpected counterpoint.

Lyric soprano Linda Lister, who sings in the McQuillan songs, is another name familiar from past Julius Williams recordings. The University of Nevada Las Vegas voice professor is expressive and tender, as required, with a voice colorful and attractive. The *Coro di Praga* is less impressive in the rather treacherous opening of *Poet Song*, sounding tentative and at times approximate of pitch and rhythm. The Prague Radio Symphony responds well to Williams's sympathetic leadership, but seems more comfortable with Roussanova's rich lyricism and Burns's familiar tunes than with some of the more exposed and sustained writing, especially in Qualliotine's excursions into space. I suspect that rehearsal time was limited for all.

At that, the road to Moments of Arrival was apparently a long one. Mention of it is made in a Roussanova interview on the Berklee web site, with a projected recording date in 2010 and a 2011 release date. Reynard Burns started a one-month Kickstarter campaign in late 2012 for his part of the project, but the actual recording didn't take place until the spring of 2014. These things are always hard to bring together, and it is a sad fact that many fine artists have to do some heavy lifting to get their music heard. In this case, the result is a program of pleasant, and in some cases touching, scores with a populist appeal. Those who enjoy conservatively written music, especially of a programmatic ilk, will find much to appreciate here. **Ronald E. Grames**

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