

Discussions -- Jay Dunner

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QUOTE OF NOTE: “My favorite album of all time is *Blue* by Joni Mitchell.” (Taylor Swift)



JENNIFER HIGDON ALL THINGS MAJESTIC / VIOLA CONCERTO / OBOE CONCERTO (Naxos American Classics)

Higdon’s reputation as one of America’s best living composers is underlined again with *All Things Majestic*. Although the viola and oboe concerti may pale a little by comparison, this trio of works stands as a clear example of why this Philadelphia resident’s compositions are so engaging. However, Higdon’s mastery of orchestral color is most evident in her tone poems (e.g., *City Scape*, *blue cathedral*), and *All Things Majestic* is no exception. With currents of Copland, bits of Barber, and even streaks of Stravinsky, the angular melodies and vibrant sound celebrate America’s natural wonders. *ATM*’s four movements – “Teton Range,” “String Lake,” “Snake River,” and “Cathedrals” – evoke both the rugged and reflective sides of the Wyoming landscape; “String Lake,” in particular, is a paint box of prismatic ripples over quiet undercurrents, while “Cathedrals” is a Rocky Mountain sigh. ****

NELLIE MCKAY MY WEEKLY READER (429 Records)

Nellie McKay’s catalog has a quirky side that features such oddities as *Home Sweet Mobile Home*, and *Normal as Blueberry Pie: A Tribute to Doris Day*. So when I read *My Weekly Reader*’s list of 60s cover songs, I almost did the “look-what-they’ve-done-to-my-song-Ma” crabby-pants dance – until I actually played the disc. McKay plays things straight, but it’s the song choices that make *My Weekly Reader* so captivating. Yes, there are a few dog-eared copies – as if we really needed another run at The Beatles’ “If I Fell.” But try The Cyrkle’s “Red Rubber Ball” (co-written by Paul Simon(!)), Steve Miller’s “Quicksilver Girl,” The Kinks’ “Sunny Afternoon,” Country Joe & the Fish’ “Not So Sweet Martha Lorraine,” Jefferson Airplane’s “Wooden Ships,” or The Small Faces’ “Itchycoo Park” (complete with phased drum rolls). The overall effect is that of a monster remix, wherein all these flower-power anthems that gained their fame through tinny, two-inch AM radio speakers were suddenly given a bass guitar and Windexed sound. You can actually understand the words! And while Frank Zappa may not be your favorite curmudgeon, the cover of his “Hungry Freaks, Daddy” guarantees the placement of *My Weekly Reader* on McKay’s curiosity shelf. ***1/2

HEART BEAUTIFUL BROKEN (Concord)

This may be Heart’s swan song, given the 2016 rift that developed between the Wilson sisters, and their subsequent respective side projects. Nancy Wilson’s Roadcase Royale’s 2017 debut, *First Things First*, and Ann Wilson’s solo tour with ex-members of Heart both suggest the end of the road for the iconic band, although each sister continues to claim merely a “hiatus” for Heart. *Beautiful Broken* may not be another *Dreamboat Annie*, but it does show that the Wilsons were far from finished. The title track kicks nearly as hard as “Barracuda,” with start-stop rhythms and growled guest vocals from Metallica’s James Hetfield. “Two,” penned by hip-hopper Ne-Yo, moves the vocal spotlight to Nancy, who, while no Ann, hangs her heart on her sleeve. “I Jump,” with its leapfrog vocal and string lines, echoes Led Zep’s “Kashmir.” The weak aspects of this release are its brevity and the fact that eight of its ten songs are either a remake or a cover – not much with which to go crazy on you. ***

***** Outstanding. **** Excellent. *** Good. ** Fair. * Ecch!

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