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Cinemusical reviews "Ragtime in Washington"

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Ragtime in Washington
Michael Adcock, piano.
Centaur 3639
Total Time: 74:05
Recording: ****/****
Performance: ****/****

In an August 5th review, I discussed Michael Adcock's virtuosic tour of keyboard transcriptions. *Ragtime in Washington* was recorded this past May and is being rolled out this summer when a lighter musical fare is the perfect summertime remedy. Ragtime is most associated with composer Scott Joplin (1868-1917) though there were many composers exploring this distinctive American form which reached its heights between 1905 and 1917. The roots though tend to go back to saloons and an improvisatory style of piano playing that emphasized an early swinging style of dotted-notes. Usually this was applied to popular tunes, folk music, or even selections from classical music. The approach to the performance itself was as varied as the performer which was how one generally knew who was playing. By the end of the century, the form bore resemblance to Sousa marches. The style itself has had a couple of resurgences first in the early 1940s and then in the 1970s, likely the result of the success of the film *The Sting* (1973) which made use of many Joplin rags.

Adcock's program is an interesting blend of rag styles associated with specific early composers. Both American composers William Albright and William Bolcolm, and later John Musto, were based at the University of Michigan and there music explored the rag as a style that could be updated and further explored resulting in many works in that style that were hailed as a refreshing change from the more avant-garde exploratory dissonances of other music in the 1960s and 1970s. Of course, Adcock makes sure to include the rather humorous *That Old Second-Viennese School Rag* by Thomas Benjamin (b. 1940-) that makes fun of the Schoenbergian compositional style.

The music is interestingly sequenced. There are four classic Joplin rags here among the ones he personally preferred. *Solace* serves as a wonderful encore to close the album. The others are grouped in the opening portion of the CD to explore subtle differences in style. The program opens with a rag in waltz time, the beautiful *Bethena*. This is followed by what is referred to as a "novelty rag", *Red Pepper Rag* which is a New York style explored in this work by Henry Lodge (1885-1933). This is also the case for *Rialto Ripples* co-written by Gerswhin and Will Donaldson (1891-1954). The *Palm Leaf Rag* is another of these great programming choices on the album which concludes this opening portion of the CD which also includes the more familiar *The Easy Winners*. Later two mid-century rags bring us back to a more popular style in *Jelly Roll Morton's Grandpa's Spells* and *Old Tom-Cat on the Keys* by Bob Zurke (1912-1944).

In the center of the program are works from the UoM group. It opens with two works by Albright (1944-1998) that explore 19th-century forms. First is the "Sleepwaker's Shuffle" from the composer's collection of *Dream Rags* (1967-70). Eubie Blake's style is on display here while Joplin's is explored in "Scott Joplin's Victory" from the 1974 *Grand Sonata in Rag*. The four selections by Bolcolm (1938-) explore various styles and influences from ragtime. Among them is the stride style of James P. Johnson in *The Brooklyn Dodge*, the *Incinerator Rag* from a set of *Classic Rags*, the *Last Rag* which Bolcolm intended as his last work in the style. There is also the beautiful *Fields of Flowers* (1977). Two selections from John Musto's (1954-) *Five Concert Rags* ("Recollections" and "In Stride"; 2003) are further examples of the rag as delicate and rhythmic approach still inspiring composers in the 21st Century.

The melodic qualities and engaging rhythms of this music can make one forgetful about the technique and rhythmic requirements of the performer here. Adcock's interpretations of these works flows very well while displaying a sense of shape and interpretive skill that makes this a required listen for anyone who longs for American piano music. Unlike his *Keyboard Transcriptions* CD which sometimes felt like the left hand was a little heavy, there is none of that here as Centaur's balance manages to make this even out very well creating a perfect imaging of someone playing in your own private bar. There is a great deal of variety here that might seem hard to achieve with the lengthy playing time but this is quite the recital of interesting pieces. The newer "art" rags are quite accessible and one would be hard pressed to even know these were composed outside the period they are referencing. Easily recommendable for those who enjoy ragtime and are looking for an excellent collection of music.

See Related:

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