

July 12, 2018

Classical Music Sentinel reviews "Ragtime in Washington"

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Jean-Yves Duperron - July 2018

Back in 1974 there was a major upsurge of interest in ragtime music from both sides of the industry. More and more people wanted to hear ragtime tunes and more and more performers wanted to play it, and even compose new pieces in the genre. And all because in December 1973, a movie titled 'The Sting', featuring Paul Newman and Robert Redford as two small-time con artists, was released to critical acclaim and went on to become a major box-office hit at the time. The soundtrack featured many rags by Scott Joplin, including 'Solace' and 'The Easy Winners' heard on this new recording, and itself became a bestseller, earned the movie an Oscar for best music, and turned Scott Joplin into a major radio star many years after his death. But like every fad, the novelty wore off quickly and we haven't heard many good ragtime recordings over the last 40 years, so it's nice to see this new arrival from Centaur Records.

Ragtime could be perceived as the early 20th century American take on the Austrian Ländler, the Waltz or Polish Mazurka since it is a dance and shares many affinities with its European counterparts. The only thing that really sets a rag apart is its syncopated rhythms in which the stronger accents of the melodic line fall between the beats rather than on the beats. Ragtime could also be taken as a subtle transition from Old World classical form to American jazz. Pianist Michael Adcock's approach is very much in keeping with European tradition as he plays these as if he was playing the Merry Widow by Franz Lehár or the Skater's Waltz by Emile Waldteufel. Clean articulation and a precise rhythmic pulse are but two of the factors that shape his expressive interpretation.

There are some pleasant surprises on this disc. For example, That Old Second-Viennese-School Rag by Thomas Benjamin is written using twelve-tone serial techniques for the melody and, surprisingly enough, it all works and sounds great as well, including the crash landing at the end. I had never heard it before and this seems to be its première recording. And John Musto's In Stride which as its title gives away, entails syncopated rhythms in the right hand against a "stride" bass line, and is probably very difficult to play. And a funny twist on the genre is Bob Zurke's Old Tom-Cat on the Keys.

I strongly recommend this CD for any and all piano music fans, but mostly to those wistful to hear some good old ragtime played with the respect it deserves.

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