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## TransCentury Communications reviews two Michael Adcock CDs

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Sheer delight is also the primary reason to hear two new Centaur discs featuring pianist Michael Adcock. Yes, Adcock is a serious and seriously talented performer, and yes, that is abundantly clear in the music he plays on these CDs. But he is also clearly a pianist who revels in what he is doing and enjoys the chance to present music with exuberance as well as sensitivity. The CD called "Ragtime in Washington" (actually recorded outside the nation's capital, in Frederick, Maryland, but why quibble?) offers a generous hour-and-a-quarter of fast and slow, original and imitative, ragtime and almost-ragtime pieces that range from the 100% authentic (Scott Joplin's Bethena, The Easy Winners, Palm Leaf Rag and Solace) to the interpretative (Scott Joplin's Victory by William Albright) to the amusingly, gently sarcastic (Thomas Benjamin's That Old Second-Viennese-School Rag). The Joplin pieces and the one here by Jelly Roll Morton, Grandpa's Spells, have inherent character quite different from that of the other pieces on the disc, although Red Pepper Rag by Henry Lodge (1885-1933) and Old Tom-Cat on the Keys by Bob Zurke (1912-1944) share somewhat similar sensibilities. Anyone who thinks "ragtime" (however defined) refers to music that all sounds essentially the same need only compare the works by Joplin, Lodge and Zurke to the four here by William Bolcom: Incinerator Rag, The Brooklyn Dodge, Last Rag and Fields of Flowers. The different handling of rhythm and harmony is fascinating – but it is also something more serious to consider than is really necessary when hearing these pieces. The ultimate point of "Ragtime in Washington" is out-and-out enjoyment, and that is what the CD provides, thanks to Adcock's abundant skill with and involvement in the material. In addition to the pieces already mentioned, the disc contains Rialto Ripples by George Gershwin and Will Donaldson (1891-1954); Albright's Sleepwalker's Shuffle; and John Musto's Recollections and In Stride. Listeners will have their favorites, and should: the pieces, most of them quite short, are very different in sense and sound. But every one of them has its pleasures, and that is just what listeners can and should notice above all: it is fun to hear this material.



The fun is somewhat more rarefied, although not more attenuated, on Adcock's other new CD, which features keyboard transcriptions of two extended works and three much shorter ones. Here Adcock has a chance, which he happily accepts, to showcase his sheer virtuosity while also displaying considerable sensitivity of tone, phrasing and emotional connection. The longest piece here, a set of 10 excerpts from Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet, is the most variegated and the most challenging in terms of requiring the pianist to convey multiple contrasting but complementary moods. Adcock handles it with warmth mixed with piquancy, contrasting the dramatic portions with the emotive ones to fine effect. And listeners need not know Prokofiev's ballet to enjoy the performance: Adcock pulls the audience into the music and lets the shifting moods of the material speak for themselves. Things are lighter and brighter in Seven Virtuoso Etudes, in which pianist Earl Wild develops and then strings together a series of George Gershwin's wonderful melodies, among them "The Man I Love," "Embraceable You" and "I Got Rhythm." Adcock has just the right touch for this material: light and swinging and thoroughly in command of the complexities that Wild brings to melodies that are essentially simple and straightforward – indeed, almost pop-music-like, making them all the easier for listeners to accept and enjoy at face value. The remaining pieces here are short, one of them (the Schumann/Liszt Widmung) functioning as an interlude between the two extended works, the other two offered at the CD's conclusion. Interestingly, Adcock places the Bizet/Horowitz Carmen variations, which would seem an ideal encore, before the Saint-Saëns/Godowsky The Swan, thereby ending the recital – and it does feel like an intimate-venue recital – on a quieter, softer note than might be expected. It is an intriguing decision, one that nicely complements Adcock's performing skill and his sensitivity to the many moods of the works he plays and the many forms of pleasure they deliver to those who hear them.

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Gail Wein • (646) 484-9691 • [ClassicalCommunications@gmail.com](mailto:ClassicalCommunications@gmail.com)

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