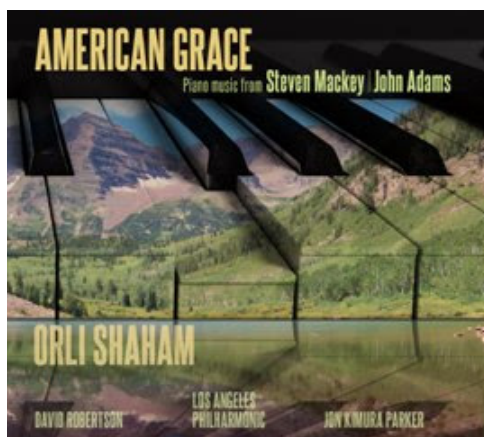


American Grace Album Review

by Daniel Hautzinger



Of all instrumentalists, pianists seem to commission and perform new works the least often. The repertoire for the piano is already so vast and worthy that many performers see no need to add to it. Why even play pieces from the past half-century, when there is so much great, neglected, earlier music?

Luckily, not all pianists think this way. Take Orli Shaham, whose album *American Grace*, released in February on Canary Classics, features attractive works written since 1975 by John Adams and Steven Mackey, as well as two world premiere recordings. One of those pieces, Steven Mackey's concerto *Stumble to Grace*, was commissioned for Shaham by a consortium of orchestras as a result of her own initiative.

Stumble to Grace (2011), performed here with the responsive Los Angeles Philharmonic under the baton of Shaham's husband, David Robertson, is Mackey's first major work for piano. It was inspired by watching his newly born son explore the world. The excitement and awkward naïveté of childhood is immediately apparent from the first notes of the piece, which is written in five continuous "Stages". The orchestra plays endearingly out of tune while bicycle bells conjure early adolescence and the celesta chimes a carefree tune. The soloist brazenly announces herself with a chord that is immediately undermined by an intentionally sour note from the orchestra. It's as if a toddler were stubbornly attempting to walk, only to stumble and fall. The piece progresses in a similar vein, with a mixture of a child's over-confident exuberance and a parent's amused tenderness.

Mackey opens "Stage 2" with one of his favorite techniques: piling conflicting rhythms on top of each other. This eventually becomes a bit tiresome, but is redeemed by a section that alternates burbling piano parts with surging orchestra presentations of the same theme. Similar moments occur throughout the piece. Pleasantly unexceptional music is quickly followed by striking, original textures. Shaham sensitively and whimsically explores the Stage Three piano solo where contemplative wandering precedes a simple melody that is disrupted by unsettling excursions into "wrong" harmonies.

After the engrossing and spacious “Stage 4,” the solo part determinedly trips through a scatter-brained theme that morphs into a herky-jerky fugue. Momentum builds...but the rug is pulled from under the listener forty seconds from the end as the orchestra suddenly vanishes and the piano takes one more solo, snuffing out what could have been a climactic ending.

Mackey’s brief *Sneaky March* (2011, which lasts one minute and forty-two seconds) also suffers from a strange ending. Coupled with Adams’s short, placid *China Gates* (1977), it constitutes the less interesting part of the disc. Shaham does tease out some interesting lines in the rather homogenous Adams.

The CD opens with *Hallelujah Junction* (1996), a two-piano piece by Adams performed by Shaham with Jon Kimura Parker. It is the most unassailably great work on the album, sharing the dynamism of *Stumble to Grace* with its vibrant rhythms and brilliantly interlocking chords. Parker and Shaham provide striking contrasts in articulation, moving from buoyant to smooth to jabbing. They also display impressive communication in navigating the complex and antagonistic network of rhythms. It ends in a vigorous display of obstinacy where both pianists attempt to go in different directions and refuse to acquiesce to the other’s wishes. After a harmonically crazed argument, they finally come to a grudging understanding for the last few chords. Stubbornness and exuberance are an essential combination in commissioning and performing new works, and Shaham nails it this CD.

This is lively repertoire, and the production and editing by Erica Brenner and mixing and mastering by Paul Blakemore appropriately favor a bright piano tone. Liner notes by *NewMusicBox*’s Frank J. Oteri draw interesting similarities between Adams and Mackey, who were born nine years apart.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 7, 2014.