

## CD Review

*Winter Morning Walks*

by Daniel Hautzinger



Maria Schneider should write a musical. Her song cycle, *Winter Morning Walks*, features idiomatic vocal writing that wouldn't be out of place in the Great American Songbook, the canny theatrical sense of Sondheim, and illustrative text settings that would be perfect for a Broadway stage.

Yet Schneider is one of today's foremost jazz composers, with two Grammys to her credit; multiple albums as the leader of her big band, the Maria Schneider Orchestra; and an association with legendary pianist and composer Gil Evans. She also has ties to the classical

world: her newest recording, *Winter Morning Walks* from 2013, fan-funded through ArtistShare, features the Australian and St. Paul Chamber Orchestras, and coalesced around soprano Dawn Upshaw, for whom both the title work and the *Carlos Drummond de Andrade Stories* were written.

Upshaw is an incredibly versatile singer, having performed everything from Handel to Crumb to Rodgers and Hammerstein. She easily adapts to Schneider's style, singing mostly without vibrato in a cabaret-esque voice. Though most of the vocal lines are undemanding, her operatic technique comes in handy during vocalise passages, like "Prologue" from the *Andrade Stories*, performed with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Her voice swoops and dips evocatively over lush strings and a pulsing Spanish groove, while her clipped staccatos are exactly precise. The melancholy "The Dead in Frock Coats" from the same set blossoms into a jeweled chord underneath a poignantly beautiful high note on the word "everlasting."

The next poem of the cycle, "Souvenir of the Ancient World," describes a simple life of trivial worries over up-surging music that sounds like it could be in the musical "Wicked." Exotic flavor spikes the last two songs. Enticing rhythms color the dramatic "Don't Kill Yourself," which pauses in ominous suspension before slinking away. "Quadrille" is wryly humorous, a skulking tango that fits its ironic poem. Cellist Peter Stumpf and violinists Steven Copes and Ruggero Alliffranchini weep with their instruments in mournful solos scattered through the cycle.

*Winter Morning Walks* sets poetry by Ted Kooser that he wrote daily during early morning perambulations after surviving cancer treatment. Schneider's music is accordingly

sentimental, and quietly depicts Kooser's understated images of nature. The Australian Chamber Orchestra begins in a mood of expectation, conjuring an icy dawn, on "Perfectly Still This Solstice Morning," an exquisite highlight. As bassist Jay Anderson, clarinetist Scott Robinson, and pianist Frank Kimbrough enter with smooth improvisations, the scene warms, as though the sun has risen. (The trio are featured throughout the cycle, alternating between improvisation and written-out music).

"When I Switched On a Light" and "Our Finch Feeder" are a drastic contrast, with agitated flutters and nervous builds. The rest of the set is softly gracious and wears its heart on its sleeve, sometimes overly so. But most of the music is a moving evocation of Kooser's poems, with a hushed strength rippling beneath. The blooming sunrise in "My Wife and I Walk the Cold Road" is a rapturous example, but "How Important It Must Be," the last song, is the most touching. Simple music beautifully captures Kooser's grateful glory in life, as "the sun stood/ right at the end of the road/ and waited for me."

*Winter Morning Walks received three Grammys on Sunday, Jan. 26, between the writing of this review and its publication: Best Classical Vocal Album, Best Contemporary Classical Composition for the title work, and Best Engineered Album-Classical.*

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