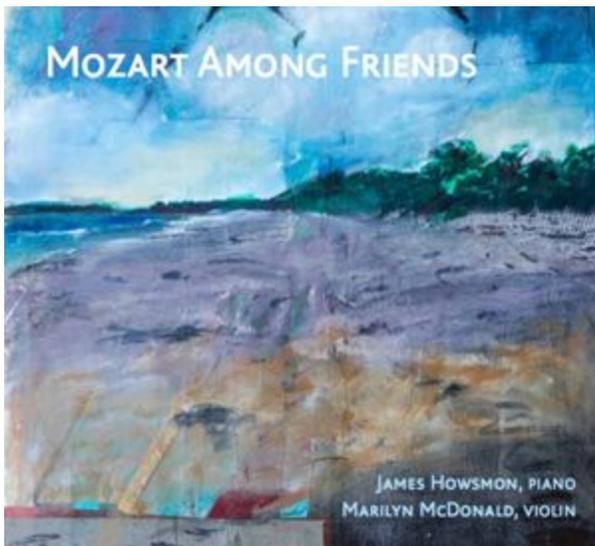


**CD Review*****Mozart Among Friends:*****James Howsmon, piano, Marilyn McDonald, violin**

by Jeremy Reynolds



There's something special about a musical collaboration that has spanned many years — a level of comfort in each other's styles coupled with a delightful *joie de vivre* that produces some tight, sparkling ensemble. There's a solid hour of this nuanced joy in pianist James Howsmon and violinist Marilyn McDonald new album, *Mozart Among Friends*, a collection of sonatas released on May 26 on the Oberlin Music label.

Both Howsmon and McDonald serve on the faculty of the Oberlin Conservatory, and this album revisits sonatas from their project of

performing all of Mozart's violin sonatas. The three lesser-known works included here are the *Sonata in G*, K. 379 (unusual for its *sturm und drang* minor-key central section), the *Sonata in F*, K. 377 (which ends in a graceful minuet), and the *Sonata in A*, K. 526 (a florid example of the composer's contrapuntal whimsy).

The duo perform each of these works with flair but without pomp, with both fire and serenity. They express Mozart's music with an intimacy born of the deepest familiarity with the scores, as well as with each other's playing.

Howsmon shapes the opening Adagio of K. 379 as a fond, warm sigh of contentment, and McDonald mimics this feeling, increasing the tempo just enough to move the music along without disturbing the mood. Howsmon introduces the Allegro section of the movement with passion but without sacrificing the elegance of Mozart's lines even in the more furious passages. If there's a standout performance on the album, it's this sonata.

The K. 377 Sonata begins with scurrying violin triplets against a cheery piano melody before the performers swap roles. McDonald plays with delightful pathos in the minor-key second movement, and Howsmon sets up a stately pace for the final movement. The musicians' obvious affection for the music makes it easy to forgive the occasional imperfection.

In the K. 526 Sonata, Mozart's writing fosters more independence between the two parts as well as more virtuosity, and Howsmon and McDonald take full advantage. From the breezy opening triplets and jocularly of the first movement, through the easy simplicity of the tuneful second movement, to the bouncy exuberance of the finale, their collaboration is completely engaging.

*Mozart Among Friends* refers both to the performers, as well as to the social, salon-style nature of chamber music in Mozart's day. That idea also extends to the album cover art, a painting by the late Leslie Miller, who was a friend of both musicians.

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