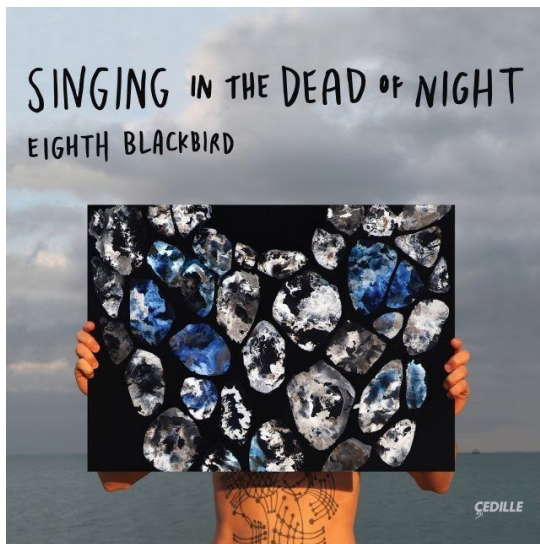


**CD Review—**  
**Eighth Blackbird:**  
*Singing in the Dead of Night*

by Lilyana D'Amato



*I know noble accents  
 And lucid, inescapable rhythms;  
 But I know, too,  
 That the blackbird is involved  
 In what I know.*

Thus begins the eighth stanza of Wallace Stevens' intensely evocative poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, which describes the haunting flight of a blackbird against the backdrop of a devastatingly still, snowy night.

Enigmatic but vivid, Stevens' imagery now serves as the artistic cornerstone of a premiere contemporary classical ensemble: Eighth Blackbird. Founded by six Oberlin Conservatory graduates in 1996, the collective's latest project, *Singing in the Dead of Night*, gives the poem's eerie nostalgia a new voice, one defined by theatrical vibrancy, depth, and motion. A collaboration with composers David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Michael Gordon — founding members of the new-music collective Bang on a Can — the album is propulsive, chaotic, and remarkably poignant.

Punctuated by the three movements of Lang's *These Broken Wings*, with pieces by Wolfe and Gordon woven inbetween, the project endeavors to uncover the dichotomy between tranquility and disorder.

These concepts are most apparent in the Lang. The first movement, buoyant and bright, captures Eighth Blackbird's energy, stamina, concentration, and technical precision. The piece perfectly navigates syncopated polyrhythms and encapsulates the feeling of weightless flight.

In stark contrast, the second movement is dominated by a melancholy passacaglia and darker motifs. Languid, falling gestures are interrupted by the sound of instruments crashing to the floor, creating a startling juxtaposition which underscores the motion of a performance in flux. Wistful introspection is broken by percussive outbursts, requiring the listener to engage actively with every phrase and bang to reconcile the project's central questions about quietude and turmoil.

The third movement harkens back to the themes of the first, moving ever forward with gusto and force, pushing both listener and performer to interact physically with the irresistible motion of the piece.

Gordon's *The Light of Dark* and Wolfe's *Singing in the Dead of Night* pair wonderfully with each of Lang's movements, again contrasting moments of silence with interludes of discord. In his program notes, Gordon reveals his vision for his piece: "chaos onstage, with the musicians grabbing the nearest available instrument and playing on it...building into a kind of out-of-control late-night jam session."

The work begins with a heavy-metal esque-cello line, crescendoing with erratic clashes, dizzying virtuosic fiddling, and fragmented glissandos, crafting a hypnotic soundscape of disarray. Similarly, the ebullient string bowing, increasingly dramatic dissonant piano, and moments of utter silence in Wolfe's spectral nocturne exquisitely convey this same isolating lawlessness. The piece, she says, is meant to communicate "the still and surreal experience of being the only one awake. Out of silence often comes inspiration — finding one's way to human song, a symphony of sound."

And what a symphony it is. *Singing in the Dead of Night* is a perfect commingling of two talented ensembles, creating a compelling musical commentary on motion and its absence.

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