

Jazz pianist Alexander stirs it up

Monty Alexander

Stir It Up:

The Music of Bob Marley

Unlike some jazz artists who are coerced into recording pop tunes for commercial appeal, pianist Monty Alexander has a natural proclivity for the music of reggae innovator Bob Marley. A native of Jamaica, Alexander also is a Marley contemporary who launched his career in the recording studios of Kingston in the 1950s.

A mainstream jazz pianist with prodigious technique, Alexander has impeccable taste in knowing when to keep it simple. Reggae is an inherently simple music, with a dropped beat on one and an emphasized beat on three.

Within that limited range, Alexander explores all the melodic and harmonic possibilities. He inserts a wry quote from The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" in the opener, "Jammin'." He alternates soulful, percussive chords and arpeggios to enhance the beauty of "Could You Be Loved." On the title track, he infuses his playing with the appropriate joyful bounce. "No Woman, No Cry" becomes an inspired reggae spiritual.

The pianist even penned a personal tribute to Marley, a ballad entitled "Nesta (He Touched the Sky)." Nesta was Marley's middle name.

For contrast, Alexander employs two different rhythm sections. The Jamaican recording group The Gumption Band lends authenticity, while the American rhythm players Derek DiCenzo on guitar, Hassan J.J. Wiggins on bass and Troy Davis on drums allow Alexander to indulge his jazz leanings. Trombonist Steve Turre's brilliant playing is featured on two tracks.

— Tom Incek

Bonney delivers smooth sounds

Richard Strauss, Songs
Barbara Bonney,
Malcolm Martineau



■ Piano man: Monty Alexander is a mainstream jazz pianist with prodigious technique.

atmosphere and lyricism. I had given up on the idea that the piano version could satisfy those who know the songs in orchestral garb. This London release has now come along to prove me wrong. Barbara Bonney's cover note is quite correct in asserting that the poetry gains in immediacy when heard in this intimate scoring, provided the singer and pianist are sensitive to the musical implications of Strauss's rich harmonies and textures. Bonney and Martineau decidedly are.

By and large (although less successfully in "Im Abendrot"), they keep things flowing so one doesn't miss the orchestral sonorities too badly. And if one follows the German carefully, one hears verbal and rhythmic

nuances that often get lost in the more opulent setting.

As in the 15 piano songs also included, Bonney's silvery, smooth sound is enhanced by a hint of charm and playfulness at times while remaining a bit cool and uninflected at others. All in all, a pleasing addition to the Strauss discography.

— David Breckbill

Opera release entertaining

Offenbach, "Orpheus in the Underworld"
Natalie Dessay, Marc Minkowski
****½

"Offenbach's music is wicked," George Bernard Shaw once wrote. "It is abandoned stuff:

every accent in it is a snap of the fingers in the face of moral responsibility: every ripple and sparkle on its surface twists me for my teetotalism, and mocks at the early rising of which I fully intend to make a habit some day."

Alas, Offenbach's music has rarely delighted me as much as has Shaw's quotation. This is in part because as Offenbach's fame grew he was given the opportunity of presenting his works in settings more lavish than those in which he had honed his craft. Thus, what his later works and revisions gained in substance they lost in vitality.

This EMI Classics recording of "Orpheus aux Enfers" is the first in my experience to approximate the heady verve Shaw heard in Offenbach. Conductor Marc Minkowski uses the original, slimly-scored 1856 opera bouffe version as the basis for this production, only inserting additional material from the 1874 revision that tradition now regards as indispensable.

This recording was made in the wake of a series of stage performances, so that effervescent dramatic energy is palpable in both orchestral playing and solo singing (Natalie Dessay is a spitfire as Eurydice, but all soloists are witty). Offenbach's opera, the libretto which Cremieux and Halevy tweaks the famous myth by imagining that Orpheus's wife Eurydice can't stand his "divine" music (represented by quotations from Gluck's setting of the opera) and intentionally seeks out the underworld populated by dandified and less than godly gods, offers a laugh a minute.

For those willing to brush up on their French to appreciate the fine points, this is among the most entertaining imaginable opera releases.

— David Breckbill

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