

## **PUTS: *To Touch the Sky; If I Were a Swan;* Symphony No. 4, *From Mission San Juan***

□ *Conspirare, Johnson; Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Alsop. Harmonia Mundi HMU 907580*



The centerpiece work in this new collection of music by 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winner Kevin Puts is the choral song cycle *To Touch the Sky*, all of whose texts are by women. Puts has clearly selected these writings carefully, assimilating them and then illuminating them from the inside. His choral writing reflects considerable contrapuntal skill and a flair for ear-pleasing sonorities, plus flashes of harmonic ingenuity and provocative deployment of some unusual vocal techniques. Sometimes, he reaches sublime heights: the first song, "Annunciation," features the opening lines of the Latin "Magnificat" text interwoven with poet Marie Howe's imagining of Mary's personal response to the heavenly announcement that she will bear God's child. Soprano Mela Dailey

soars radiantly above the chorus in what becomes a mixture of wonderment, ecstasy and humility. The following song, "Unbreakable," uses vocal slides and rapidly shifting tonal centers as if to depict the composer's attempt to break that which cannot be broken — the sixteenth-century poet Mirabai's binding love for God. The simplicity of the last stanza is all the more moving after the complex, biting sonorities that have preceded it. "At Castle Wood," the midpoint of the nine-song work, employs a pleasing and poignant but relatively conventional harmonic palette that doesn't match the startling bleakness of Emily Brontë's poem. Several other shorter songs, such as "The Fruit of Silence," with a five-line text by Mother Teresa, and the spare but sophisticated "Epitaph," to a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay, are far more distinctive. The final song, "Most noble evergreen" (to a Hildegard of Bingen poem), effectively captures the grandeur of a giant tree; Puts's music lets us imagine the dazzling sunlight shining brilliantly through the towering branches. The excellent vocal group Conspirare, under the impressive leadership of Craig Hella Johnson, maintains its customary lofty standard.

The opening work, *If I Were a Swan*, a setting of a poem by Fleda Brown (the composer's aunt), originally slated to be part of the cycle, opens with pretty, floating chords that indeed evoke the tranquility of a swan on the surface of a lake. The piece soon gains steam rhythmically and harmonically, starting on the word "turbulence," and introduces an ostinato of rapidly repeated syllables on the word "dazzle." It's indisputably engaging but not so original as some of what comes later.

Puts's Symphony No. 4 is an homage to the Mission San Juan Bautista, site of a concert each year as part of San Diego's Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music. There's a detailed backstory to the piece about the indigenous Mutsun Indians and their resistance to giving up their native melodies when the friars of the Mission tried to teach them "civilized" church music. According to Gavin Plumley's liner notes, the resonant hymns of the friars compete with the more vibrant sound world of the Mutsuns, leading to a "tintinnabulous confrontation," followed by reconciliation. Ultimately, however, the piece has to stand on its own, without reference to the programmatic content; this it does, for the most part, until the big, neo-romantic symphonic ending, which is no doubt a crowd-pleaser but doesn't have much new to say. Marin Alsop's fine performance with the Baltimore Symphony is knowledgeable and convincing. □