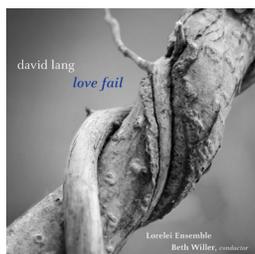


Recording Reviews

Jace Saplan, editor



David Lang: *love fail*
Lorelei Ensemble
Beth Willer, conductor
Cantaloupe Music,
CA21158 (2020; 50'00")

David Lang's stunning version for treble voices of *love fail* is brought to life by the uncompromising and attentive performance of Beth Willer and the Lorelei Ensemble. The American composer and *Bang on a Can* co-founder originally wrote the fifteen-part meditation on the timeless love story of Tristan and Isolde for the Anonymous 4 in 2012 and arranged it for the nine-member Lorelei Ensemble to premiere in 2016.

Throughout the fifty-minute piece, Lang weaves together his text after the retellings of the Tristan myth by Marie de France, Gottfried von Strassburg, Bérout, Thomas of Britain, and Richard Wagner intermingled with micro-fictions by contemporary author Lydia Davis. Lang shares, "I thought I might learn something about love if I could explore this in a piece, putting details abstracted from many different retellings of Tristan and Isolde next to texts that are more modern, more recognizable to us, more real."¹ He distills centuries of retellings of the great love story and yokes them with the present day. Lang also removed time markers and names, instead using "he" and "she", which creates an intimate and self-reflective nature.

¹ love fail program note by the composer, <https://davidlangmusic.com/music/love-fail>.

Musically, Lang also cuts between the ancient and modern, invoking plainsong alongside modern harmonies, languid lines, and frequent pauses.

One of the most striking elements of the work is Lang's refusal to luxuriate in the moment. There is nothing extra, nothing extraneous, and yet, each section is deeply captivating—hitting the listener in the chest with a directness and authenticity infrequently achieved: "My music never has anything in it that says: 'This moment is really gorgeous. Let's luxuriate in it,'" Lang shared. "Excitement is not the most important thing to me, and neither is beauty."²

Lorelei's interpretation is mature and embodied, clearly conveying their emotional investment, time with, and connection to the work. Beth Willer affirmed, "We have an affinity for David's music, and have been performing it since our early years together as an ensemble. This piece is particularly striking—David's brilliant use of silence and direct delivery of text, the intimacy and immediacy of Lydia Davis' poetry, the ancient tale of accidental and all-encompassing love—

² David Lang as quoted in the New York Times New York edition, Section AR, Page 11 on Dec. 2, 2012 with the headline: Keeping the Magic Without the Thunder.

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it draws you in, and it's gripping."³ The group's commitment is evident in their intoxicating command of the work, as well as their refined attention to detail.

From the first movement *he was and she was*, which portrays "he" in canonic, halting entrances, and "she" in homophonic pristine simplicity, the ensemble melds the long lush lines of rich harmony with a purity and depth of tone that seems to fit Lang's intent perfectly. It is also refreshing to notice the way in which the vocalists' diverse color pallet and expressive choices mirror his undramatic yet emotionally engaged compositional style. The ensemble's unification of tone and pristine intonation allows the text to move to the foreground, commanding the ear to focus on the story as opposed to the technique.

There is also a repetitive meditative affect present throughout the work that lulls the listener into a deeply contemplative space. The longest of the fifteen total movements is *the wood and the vine*, which serve as a metaphor for the complexity of intertwining lovers. The piece is reminiscent of a narrator accompanied by the Greek chorus and begins; "now I'll tell you a story, that is also the truth." It opens to a powerful delivery of the duality of hope and despair, and also references Marie de France's version of Tristan, where he carves a message into a stick for Isolde to find and interpret.

Finally, it is paramount to note that the engineering of this recording highlights the unique compositional elements of *love fail* as well as the technical artistry of Lorelei. In comparison to the quite dry, direct sound presented in other notable recordings (which admittedly are both

of the original quartet version of the piece), the balance created here is an even blend between a more wet cathedral sound and one in which each individual singer can be heard. The result is not only incredibly flattering to the voice, but presents an even perspective that captures the depth, unification, and balance of ensemble. Notably, the reverberation at phrase ends is greatly curbed to almost nothing, shining momentary spotlights on the breathtaking moments of silence throughout.

Beyond the innate musical value, Willer and Lorelei's recording provides the choral art, but possibly even more important is the greater societal impact of a recording such as this by a treble-voiced ensemble. Lorelei's mission includes their commitment to "...bring works to life that point toward a 'new normal' for vocal artists, and women in music,"⁴ and that is exactly what this project achieves.

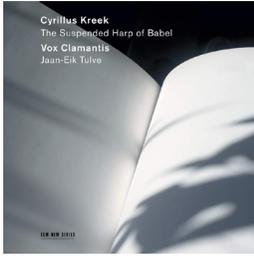
The elevation and advancement of treble and/or women's voices can only happen when groups such as Lorelei commit to a level of craft that elevates the standard for which others strive, and do so in a manner that inspires, uplifts, and empowers. This stunning album reaffirms Beth Willer's leadership and Lorelei's place as such an ensemble, paving the way for others to follow.

Gratitude during this moment in history is essential. The choral profession would be remiss not to express appreciation for both David Lang's exquisite composition of *love fail*, and for the stunning work of a conductor and ensemble dedicated to such interpretive artistry and a truly wholehearted expression of love.

—Corie Brown

³ Beth Willer as quoted in the June 2020 press release for the album, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51db1481e4b0912307922a77/t/5ef67d1898fcd2344dbc562d/1593212185098/Lorelei_LangLoveFail_CantaloupeJune2020.pdf.

⁴ <https://www.loreleiensemble.com/ensemble>



Cyrillus Kreek. *The Suspended Harp of Babel*
Vox Clamantis
Jaan-Eik Tulve, conductor
ECM Records
ECM4819041
(2020; 67'01")

Cyrillus Kreek (1889–1962) is best known in the international choral world for his two Psalm settings, *Taaveti laul nr. 1 Õnnis on inimene* [Blessed is the Man] and *nr. 104 Kilda mu hing Issandat* [Bless the Lord, My Soul]. Although Kreek studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, he had great interest in the folk music of his homeland of Estonia and began collecting folk songs from around the country. Because of this work, he is considered one of the influencers in the creation of the Estonian nationalistic music style.

The Suspended Harp of Babel allows listeners to explore more deeply the intermingled traditions of Estonian folk and sacred songs that represent the Estonian nationalistic style. This recording showcases a wonderful balance of four psalm settings (*Taaveti laulud*, Psalms of David) written from 1923–1944, four sacred folk tunes from 1917–1919, and four additional forms, including traditional Orthodox vespers and a presentation of the traditional Estonian folk form of regilaul intertwined with the Orthodox vespers. All of these pieces are connected beautifully with introductions and interludes composed by Marco Ambrosini and played on the kannel, a traditional Estonian zither, and the Swedish nyckelharpa, a keyed fiddle used extensively in folk music. Kreek's connection to the Swedish folk traditions stems from time he spent in the Estonian Swedish villages while he was collecting folk incipits. Incorporating the nyckelharpa is a beautiful way to honor that connection.

The album is artistically constructed with great attention to the order and flow of the compositions, creating an overall feeling of a “folk liturgical event.” This order introduces the listener to the three distinct forms of the compositions and then allows the listener to reflect on the similarities and differences as those forms alternate between the tracks.

Grammy-winning Vox Clamantis, founded in 1996, is one of the premiere Estonian choral ensembles. They are known for their clear, full and balanced ensemble sound, and they execute all of these qualities through this recording. Their vocal sensitivity and flexibility are highlighted as they move from lyric folk song melodic lines to beautiful and lush chordal movement in the orthodox vespers and hymn-like portions. Known for their love and interpretation of Gregorian chant and the music of Arvo Pärt, they transfer those skills and focus beautifully to their thoughtful and sincere interpretation of these pieces by Cyrillus Kreek.

Jacob's Dream / Orthodox Vespers: Proemial Psalm [Jakobi unenägu/Algulaul] encapsulates the true spirit of the album with the interweaving of the call and response form of the Estonian regilaul (this one is from the Kanepi parish of southeastern Estonia), the free improvisation by both the kannel and nyckelharpa, and the haunting traditional chant and response of the Orthodox Vespers Proemial Psalm.

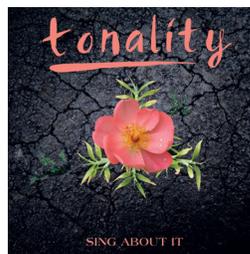
The sacred folk tunes presented have a beautiful comfort in their hymn-like form, but also incorporate folk performance practice elements that create an ethereal experience traversing the sacred and the secular. In *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come* [Ma tulen taevast ülevalt], the juxtaposition of the chorale-like hymn form

with the improvisation of the nyckelharpa is an celestial mixture of sounds: a Renaissance-like viol reflection coupled with traditional Lutheran hymns wrapped together with a slightly raw folk timbre. It is as if the performance spans centuries all within a few minutes.

The juxtaposition of folk and sacred comes to the forefront again in *Awake My Heart* [Mu süda, ärka üles], where lively and energetic interludes by the kannel, nyckelharpa, and percussion are interspersed with the sacred folk tune in a traditional chorale arrangement and verses sung by a cantor, representing a pseudo regilaul leader in this amalgam of the folk and sacred.

This recording is an excellent entry point to the creative world of Cyrillus Kreek, as access to many of Kreek's compositions has been challenging in the past for conductors outside of the Baltic region. For more information on Kreek and his compositions, the Estonian Music Information Centre (emic.ee) has created a wonderful database of his works that includes a short biography, listing of his compositions and reference information for where the manuscripts are held, what recordings are available, and how to purchase his scores.

—Heather MacLaughlin Garbes



Sing About It
Tonality
Alexander Lloyd Blake,
director
B07N416K1J
(2020; 60'09")

Shortly after their inception in 2016, LA-based professional choir TONALITY elected to focus on presenting concerts and events that feature a diverse array of music centered around underrepresented topics in choral music. Recent concerts have focused on issues of social justice, homelessness, refugees, and more. In 2018 TONALITY presented a concert called *Democracy in Action* where, in addition to performing many of the songs that appear on *Sing About It*, they helped concertgoers register to vote. In 2020, they were honored with the Chorus America/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, and their innovative 2020–2021 virtual season features premieres of virtual recordings coupled with Q&A sessions with composers.

Sing About It is TONALITY's first album, and true to their mission, features a diverse array of music performed beautifully around the aforementioned themes. Dr. Alexander Lloyd Blake, the Founder, Executive Director, and Artistic Director, skillfully draws a variety of genre-authentic and -appropriate tone colors and expressions out of his singers. TONALITY sounds just as authentic performing vocal jazz (*Democracy*) as they do performing modern classical choral works (*No More!*, *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*) and pop (*True Colors*). The album appropriately opens with an extended pop-folk influenced riff in Moira Smiley's "Sing About It."

The work of LA-based composers Dr. Zanaida Robles and Shawn Kirchner features heavily on *Sing About It*. Robles' "Can You See" is a dense,

polyphonic reworking and reimagining of portions of “The Star-Spangled Banner” juxtaposed with other texts like “love is love.” Tonality’s performance is compelling and urgent—their aggressive, dynamic, and full-throated approach to the dissonant final phrase “and the home of the brave,” is bone chilling. Kirchner’s *Eye for Eye* features a Ghandi-inspired text written in response to the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando and is sung with a beautiful simplicity of tone and an unrushed tempo.

The recording also features three movements of Joel Thompson’s *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*. This work is sadly as relevant today as it was when it was completed in 2015, and Tonality provides an expressive interpretation of the piece. The third movement, “Amadou Diallo,” is particularly heart-wrenching, featuring an exquisite and artful tenor solo.

One of the highlights of the album is *True Colors*, written by Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly, made famous by Cyndi Lauper, and arranged for Tonality by Saunder Choi. Featuring well-tuned and expressive extended harmonies and a complex and intriguing reimagining of the form of the original song, Tonality’s performance draws out the cleverest elements of Choi’s arrangement.

Sing About It is beautifully conceived, sung, and executed. For directors, it provides a high-quality catalogue of music by living composers that speaks to the issues our singers face and grapple with in their daily lives. For all, it is a timely and important statement about what choral music can be in the 21st century.

—Alexander Schumacker