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ELISABETH VON TRAPP SETS GREAT POETRY TO MUSIC, BEAUTIFULLY

By Jim Lowe

Elisabeth von Trapp's new album, "Poetic License," leaves no doubt that she is one of Vermont's most distinctive singer-songwriters. The Waitsfield native has sculpted music that defies categorization in favor of simple musical beauty. With contributions from some of Vermont's finest musicians, this new CD invokes genres from pop to jazz to classical to create its own style of music-making.

Von Trapp is unusual in that, instead of creating her own lyrics, she sets the poetry of great writers to her own music. Previous efforts with the poetry of Robert Frost have garnered von Trapp national media attention, but in this album it is her take on Shakespeare that is most striking.

"The Passionate Pilgrim" is her setting of the sonnet. "I opened up the sonnets and found that," von Trapp said, "and I couldn't believe how serendipitous that was - to find those words to describe so beautifully how when music and poetry do come together, it's really sweet."

In fact, the song opens with a tender cello lament played ever so expressively by von Trapp's frequent collaborator Erich Kory. When von Trapp's voice follows, it's warm and tender.

If music and sweet poetry agree,
As they must needs,
The sister and the brother,
Then must the love be great
'Twixt thee and me,
Because thou lov'st the one,
And I the other.

Von Trapp delivers these lines with a very precise but soft enunciation. The song is skillfully written with rhythmic variety and a gentle lyricism, and with von Trapp singing and accompanying herself on guitar, it's beautiful music-making.

Frost is, in fact, well-represented on this album. Five songs are set to the local poet's earthy lines, the five that Trapp has received permission to use from the Frost estate. "My biggest worry was how to surround those poems, what music would do the poems justice," she said.

The woodsy "Come In" becomes a really folky number with voice, guitar and cello. It's just charming and light with a hint of tenderness. "Acquainted with the Night" becomes a tender ballad, again for voice, guitar and cello, this time with backup voices. It's schmaltz, but beautiful schmaltz.

Spicier is von Trapp's jazz-flavored take on "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," with some saltier harmonies. It's light, airy, but retains von Trapp's trademark lyricism, enhanced by stylish jazz piano by Chas Eller. It has a nice jazz flavor, but never too spicy.

"The Road Not Taken" becomes a nice spicy tango for Kory's cello, not a dangerous tango, but full-flavored and fun. It's all like high-quality chamber music. One of the most interesting of the Frost poems musically is "The Impulse" (from

"The Hill Wife"), with a beautiful piano part created by Eller joined by Steve Klimowski on clarinet.

Von Trapp began with a melody from a book of English ballads, but gradually it morphed into her own. "I realized, looking at that poem, it was a ballad," von Trapp said. "It had the shape, it had the feel. I didn't mind that it was so dark and so sad."

Not all songs are von Trapp's own. She and her collaborators have created a dramatic treatment of the Sting song "Fragile." Von Trapp sings a quietly intense lament, "If blood will flow when flesh and steel are one ..." against a restless bed of broken guitar chords. In the middle, the song erupts into a Steve Reich-like Minimalist drama. It has a quiet pulling power to it, making it a pretty potent song decrying violence.

The most unusual bit of thievery is von Trapp's arrangement for folk guitar and voice of Franz Schubert's famous song "An Die Musik (Ode to Music)," originally written for voice and piano. Von Trapp had heard the famous Yo Yo Ma play an arrangement for cello and guitar, and was intrigued enough to create her own version. And she sings it in German, the language she heard in her home growing up. (A translation is included.) "It's a little bit different," von Trapp said. "My approach is a little bit more folk."

Purists may balk, but it works. Sure, it's not Elly Ameling and Dalton Baldwin (a famous lieder duo), but it successfully conveys the song's message - and it's beautiful.

Most imaginative is the album's treatment of the Reid-Brooker Procul Harum song "A Whiter Shade of Pale." The introduction is a slice of Bach's First Cello Suite, played by Kory, with von Trapp's beautiful and ethereal vocalise entering above and soaring. It moves into the Procul Harum song with cello and guitar, pausing for a Rococo interlude, returning to the song, then back to the beginning.

It's simply beautiful. The cello playing and singing are joyfully expressive. It's nice to hear a pop song with this degree of musical sophistication - without losing its simple beauty.

There are also two instrumentals, both by von Trapp - with the other musicians adding improvisation. "Sugar Hill" is a well-played rag, exuberant and jaunty. "Amherst," with cello solo and guitar, is expressive and mood-setting, even touching.

"Somewhere Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World," the Israel Kamakawiwo'ole arrangement of the two classic songs mixed together, will disconcert many, but it is beautifully done with von Trapp's inherent optimism.

The only disappointment is "Haiku," von Trapp's setting of 17th century Japanese Haiku. It's full of beautiful sounds, but it feels static and new age. Part of the problem is that inertia contrasts with the moving beauty of the remainder of the album.

Von Trapp's "Poetic License" is one of the most imaginative, diverse and beautiful singer-songwriter albums out there.