

WorkingPOET

Elisabeth von Trapp Sets Frost Poetry To Music

"Poetic License" -- CD

I've not reviewed a music CD for WorkingPOET before -- but I believe this one will be of special interest to our readers. The artist's name will be familiar to long-time readers of WP because in an earlier issue we reported on the story behind the making of this CD. Here's the story.

In one of our past issues (March, I think, of 2002) I wrote a Spout Off column titled "Stewing the Strawberries," in which I told the story of a talented musician, singer, and writer named Elisabeth von Trapp. She had aroused the ire of some Robert Frost aficionados by obtaining the rights to set to music five Frost poems. She had already set one of his poems to music on an earlier album, but the idea of doing five more incurred an unusual amount of rancor in some circles. Why? Because Frost himself generally disliked the idea of poetry set to music, referring to it as the literary equivalent of "stewed strawberries." Keep in mind that a lot has happened in music since 1963, the year Frost died.

Be that as it may, Frost's publisher, Henry Holt, had no qualms granting Ms. von Trapp the rights, but a great yawping sound arose from some quarters. Frost didn't like it, so his fans shouldn't stand for it. And listening to most classical settings of poetry (whether Frost or Yeats or Dickinson), I can sympathize. Especially the choral settings, which tend to blur the words and sound so incredibly over-serious.

But folk, rock, pop, and jazz are another matter. I think of myself as perhaps the world's greatest collector of poetry set to music in those idioms. The following are my touchstones:

- * English folksinger Peter Bellamy's unsurpassed settings of Rudyard Kipling -- think what you want of Kipling, Bellamy's renderings are a delight
- * American singer-songwriter Greg Brown's settings of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Get this one.
- * harpist Jay Ansill's take on the poetry of Robert Graves (now sadly out of print)
- * hammer-dulcimer master Malcolm Dalglish's sublime renditions of Wendell Berry
- * Brazilian jazz chanteuse Luciana Souza's laid-back album of settings of Neruda's poems and another album of hers containing several settings of Elizabeth Bishop

But now, I am pleased to report, Elisabeth von Trapp has swiftly entered my pantheon of perfection. How do I begin to describe them?

First, the voice. It is, if you can imagine, as pure and as evocative as Loreena McKennitt's but without the sometimes affected mannerisms. And Von Trapp's voice "cuts" better -- that is, the words are more distinct, making it perfect for rendering poetry. There is a hint of classical training underlying her voice, but there is hardly a detectable vibrato. It is interesting that so-called "folk" singers like Joan Baez and Judy Collins worked hard to develop a vibrato (a very non-folk technique), while many classically trained singers, like von Trapp, have disciplined themselves to sing with a more un-wavering voice.

Then, there's the song selections. There is, most obviously the poetry. The five Frost settings are "Come In," "Acquainted with the Night," "The Impulse" (from the "Hill

Wife"), "Stopping by the Woods," and "The Road Not Taken." To me, the biggest surprise was how unexpectedly up-tempo the last two settings were, giving the songs a hope and brightness that I'd not seen in them before.

But those aren't the only poems on the album. She also does a very delicate setting of Shakespeare's "Passionate Pilgrim," which is a perfect comment on the album itself, since it discusses the interrelatedness of music and verse. She contemporizes Schubert's "Ode to Music," and she ends the album with a very "Sakura Sakura"-like melody for four haiku (three by Basho and one by Onitsura). When's the last time you heard haiku set successfully to music? Von Trapp's settings are superb.

For good measure, she does a couple self-composed instrumentals (her guitar work really cooks) and a few unexpected cover versions: a very moody, almost mystical rendering of Procol Harum's "Whiter Shade of Pale," a delicate reading of Sting's "Fragile," and a quirky medley of a nicely deconstructed "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and "What a Wonderful World."

Apart from the particulars, this album communicates a sense of hope and, most especially, graciousness. In light of the controversy her Frost settings sparked, she responds to her critics with an enormous gentility. I had a chance to talk with her on the phone briefly, and she called it "a dialogue."

The album is just that, a dialogue about the nature of words and music together, about the interconnectedness of people and their modes of expression. From "Passionate Pilgrim," with its debate between verse and music, to the album's title, POETIC LICENSE, von Trapp engages every listener with more than wonderful words and tunes. She engages them with intelligence and heart. Nearly every song is either about people together or people in isolation -- and I think her point is that music and poetry are bridges that connect us. Without them, we die of loneliness, like the Hill Wife in Frost's poem.

The epigraph to the album is from Rilke: "To sing is to be." Five words that apply equally to the musician and the poet. If you like singers in the vein of Loreena McKennitt, then find a copy of POETIC LICENSE.

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"How does Elisabeth Von Trapp do it? POETIC LICENSE is not only passionate -- it is intelligent as well -- never condescending, never clichéd. It is an album for anyone who loves sublimely beautiful singing, poetry, and music -- all at the same time."

"POETIC LICENSE IS one of the finest attempts to set poetry to music ever recorded -- from Frost to Basho to Shakespeare. But it's much more than that. Whether Elisabeth is covering Sting or Schubert or Harold Arlen, this album is a mature artist's coming into her own as a singer, writer, and instrumentalist."

"On POETIC LICENSE Elisabeth Von Trapp strikes the perfect balance between unity and eclecticism, between grace and edginess, between the heart and the head. It's time she receives the national recognition that she deserves. She's earned her cred -- and shouldn't be anybody's best-kept-secret any longer."

-- Robert Hudson, editor, WorkingPOET.com

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