

Sarah Maria Sun's Hypnotic "Harawi"

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MESSIAEN: *Harawi* / Sarah Maria Sun, *sop*; Stefka Perifanova, *pno* / Mode (number not currently available)

This stunning album, scheduled for release on September 20 of this year, features the still-young and somewhat outré German soprano Sarah Maria Sun in a performance of Olivier Messiaen's *Harawi*, and as good as I thought Tony Arnold was in her New Focus recording of this song cycle—and she was, indeed, very fine—Sun is positively transcendent.

From the first notes of *La ville qui dormait* to the dying piano sound in *Dans le noir*, this is a performance that will absolutely rivet you. Sun achieves this miracle as much, if not more, by the sheer quality of her voice, though she interprets very well. Although Arnold may score a few points in interpretation over her here and there, she doesn't cast as much of a spell over you with the sheer

sound of her voice, and Arnold does have a very attractive voice. The difference is like listening to a good coloratura soprano—let's say Natalie Dessay in her prime—and then listening to someone with the ethereal voice of a Kathleen Battle. No matter how good Dessay was, Battle is going to score over her just because the voice itself is exceptional and has overtones in it that Dessay's does not. The same comparison holds regarding Sun vs. Arnold (or anyone else, for that matter).



Stefka Perifanova

But don't think for a moment that Sun does not grasp these elusive songs. She does a remarkable job with the lyrics in many of them. It's just that the overall ambience of the voice is hypnotic in and of itself. And pianist Stefka Perifanova, a name new to me, captures fully Messiaen's slightly wacky transformation of bird calls into piano notes. Where Sun seduces and cajoles the listener, Perifanova provides an offsetting joyous energy. They complement each other in a way that only the best singer-accompanist duos can.

Normally, I don't care for CD sonics with much ambience or reverb in them, but the way this disc is engineered actually complements not only Sun's voice but the specific vocal effects she creates. In fact, I would credit the CD sound as the third "performer" in this cycle. With drier or tighter-miked sound, some of the magic would disappear. Does this

mean that Sun couldn't duplicate this kind of magic in a live concert? Not necessarily. All she'd have to do is select a hall with good ambience, place herself several feet back from the first row of the audience, and let her voice fly up to the rafters. I saw and heard Kathleen Battle do the same thing, way back in 1978, in Cincinnati's Music Hall, a recital with James Levine at the piano. Know how to use your space, and the space will benefit your voice.

This clearly goes straight to the top of performances of this unusual and somewhat difficult song cycle. A must-have for those who enjoy this cycle.

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