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**Review of *Choral Music of Thea Musgrave*, Bridge Records, 2004**

Vicki Stroehler

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**Thea Musgrave:  
Choral Works**

The New York Virtuoso Singers  
Harold Rosenbaum, conductor  
Michael York, narrator  
2004 Bridge Records, Inc.,  
Bridge 9161, 72:29

“Is the silence strong enough to carry  
back the music to its source...”

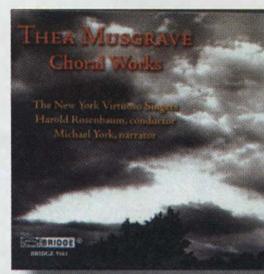
—Hart Crane,  
“My Grandmother’s Love Letters”

**E**xtraordinary music demands  
extraordinary performance.  
Unfortunately, in this  
recording of Thea Musgrave’s  
recent choral works (most composed  
between 1986 and 1994), the music  
presented here fails to receive fully sat-  
isfying realization. Each work, however  
different, receives the same approach, as  
though director and chorus understand  
neither the texts nor their settings. While  
Musgrave’s craft proves remarkably

consistent, the diverse compositional  
techniques she exploits show an equally  
remarkable variety. Unfortunately, these  
performances by Harold Rosenbaum  
and the New York Virtuoso Singers cap-  
ture their unity, but not their variety. It  
is precisely this variety that must drive  
interpretation.

To be sure, Thea Musgrave presents  
the listener with something of a challenge.

Scottish  
born and  
French  
trained  
(under the  
tutelage of  
that grand  
dame of  
contempo-  
rary music,  
Nadia Boulanger), she has resided in the



States since 1972. That she turned to  
another British ex-patriot with a craft in-  
formed by the continent—W. H. Auden—  
for the central work on this recording  
should not surprise. Her feet—as Auden’s  
were—are in two places: Britain and  
America. Her British heritage shows in  
her choice of texts and subject matter, in  
her use and choice of pre-existing musi-  
cal materials, and in her careful attention  
to the text that only post-Britten British  
composers achieve. Her compositional  
technique was honed by Boulanger and  
shaped into a style that, though British,  
is uniquely her own. Her Americanism  
shows in these works, as well, in the Hart  
Crane cycle and in the third Underground  
poems set, whose performance space  
requires offstage soloists.

The works heard here are intriguing,  
due in part to their fascinating texts. Mus-  
grave places text clearly at the forefront,  
as in her speech-styled melodies and in  
text repetition at key structural points.  
The crux of a particular text is always  
given a special moment in the composi-  
tion, set with a gesture that distinguishes  
it from other melodic lines or locates it at  
the work’s climax. Like the music with  
which they are paired, the Musgrave’s  
text choices are quite extraordinary. The  
disc’s first selection is a 1986 setting  
of the Advent portion of Auden’s 1944  
poem, *For the Time Being*. The second  
comprises settings of a cycle of poems  
by Hart Crane, gleaned from his *White*

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*Buildings* collection of 1926 and titled here, *Black Tambourine*. The remainder of the disc is completed devoted to a light work in the style of Britten's *Ballad of Green Broom* from his *Five Flower Songs* (John Cook, set in 1963), and three sets of works on poems prominently displayed in London's tube stations during the 1980s. Several must be singled out for special consideration.

The Auden setting captures unfailingly the poet's acerbic wit and preachy-ness. Musgrave's repetition of the words "We are the children of God" during the narrative second section shows a deep understanding of Auden's suggestion that we humans have somehow forgotten our roles on earth. Musgrave sets these difficult words with compelling honesty, casting judgment on the cold human heart that "seemed to have what it took," but, alas, did not. From the Hart Crane cycle, *My Grandmother's Love Letters* merits particular notice. Musgrave "almost" quotes Mozart's C major piano sonata, but not quite, as if our memory, like those

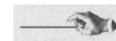
of the much-loved grandmother, doesn't quite serve—we struggle to remember, yet we cannot.

The three sets titled *On the Underground* are equally rich with invention and imagination. Musgrave seems to know the exact needs of the text in order to achieve its best expression. The fourth poem of the first set, Emily Dickinson's *Much Madness* is divinest Sense, is brought with assurance into the twentieth century. The madness of which Dickinson writes is not Victorian at the hands of Musgrave, but most squarely of the age of Huxley's *Brave New World*. The setting, with its poignant dissonances, is hauntingly beautiful. The third set consists of a single work and finds the poetry of Chaucer juxtaposed with the medieval round *Sumer is icumen in*, showing once again clear technical facility and deep understanding of text.

Musgrave's presentations of these texts are compelling. Unfortunately, the performances lack the energy the texts and music demand and deserve. Dis-

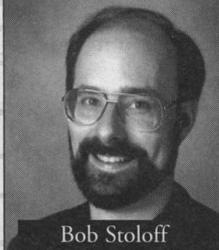
sonances, rather plentiful, fail to lock in fast enough, and texts often fall by the wayside, victim of a lack of careful diction. There are some nice moments: the opening of the Hart Crane cycle *North Labrador* and the rendition of the Emily Dickinson setting certainly have much to offer. That the unity of Musgrave's style is understood also impresses. There is, however, a fundamental lack of energy in the performances. *John Cook* provides a telling example. This work should be fun, as it is a part-song in the English tradition of some of the more bawdy offerings of Henry Purcell. Its lack of energy, though, is a fatal flaw. I do recommend this disc as a way to get to know Musgrave's music, but with the reservations discussed as to the performances.

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