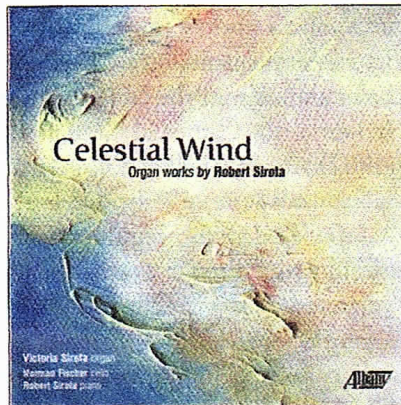


THE AMERICAN ORGANIST

RECORDINGS



CELESTIAL WIND: ORGAN WORKS BY ROBERT SIROTA. Victoria Sirota, organ; Robert Sirota, piano; Norman Fischer, cello. III/53 Holtkamp organ (1998) of the Leith Symington Griswald Hall, The Peabody Conservatory, Baltimore Md., and the IV/151 organ of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine (E.M. Skinner Opus 150, 1910; Aeolian-Skinner Opus 150-A, 1954; restored by Quimby Pipe Organs, 2008). Albany Records, TROY1502. Albanyrecords.com. Robert Sirota has earned a reputation over the past four decades as a composer of distinction, writing for a wide range of media including orchestral, choral, stage, liturgical, and chamber works. The *New York Times* has described his style as “fashioned with the clean, angular melodies, tart harmonies, lively syncopations, and punchy accents of American neo-Classicism. . . . Thick, astringent chromatic harmonies come in tightly bound chords to create nervous sonorities. Yet, the textures are always lucid; details come through.” These qualities aptly describe his organ works.

The six works on this recording were composed for Sirota’s wife, Victoria R. Sirota, a chronical of their relationship of 45 years (at the date of the recording). Victoria describes her husband’s stylistic diversity, experimenting with various forms: Baroque

(*Toccata* and Chorale Preludes on *Herzliebster Jesu* and *An Wasserflüssen Babylon*), *Klangfarbenmelodie* (*Four Pieces*), organ with instruments (*Easter Canticles* for organ and cello, and *Letters Abroad* for organ and piano), and incorporating the resonance of a building (*Celestial Wind*, recorded at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine). While a first hearing of Sirota's music, which is highly dissonant, may leave the uninitiated somewhat bewildered, it is in fact highly structured, both motivically and rhythmically, employing sophisticated contrapuntal techniques. The use of color prevails, through structure and harmony as well as instrumental timbre.

The *Easter Canticles* ("Vigil," "Crucifixion," "Resurrection") are especially poignant, having been composed following the completion of Sirota's opera *Iscaariot*. The combination of cello with organ is particularly appropriate in eliciting the deep emotional impact of the subject. *Letters from Abroad* is a heart-warming personal work that was written during the time when the Sirotas were geographically separated—Victoria being in Europe pursuing research on Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel while

Robert was in Massachusetts parenting their four-year-old son and tending to his new position teaching composition at Tanglewood. The nine movements are musical "postcards" that were ultimately assembled into the complete work. The final two movements, fittingly, are an homage to Fanny Mendelssohn. The incorporation of a melody from a German Drehorgel (street organ) and the tune "Der Berliner Bär" is a clever, humorous gesture that highlights the stark differences of style between "traditional" music and the contemporary expressions surrounding it. The work was recorded at St. John the Divine. Audio and video monitors mitigated the challenges of a 100-foot separation!

Sirota's *Toccata* is a tour de force, a whirlwind of rhythm and virtuosic passagework, requiring rapid registration changes. It incorporates, in a single movement, a fantasia, slow movement, scherzo, and finale, all based on a melodic cell derived from a Bach Arioso. The *Four Pieces for Organ* are miniatures designed to demonstrate tonal characteristics of a small organ built by George Bozeman for St. Paul's Lutheran Church in East Northport, N.Y. The work employs

various compositional techniques such as rhythmic counterpoint, syncopations creating an effect of ragtime, subtle shifting and nuance of color, and a "negative" toccata that disintegrates rather than climaxing at the end. The *Two Lenten Chorale Preludes* use the familiar tunes as a framework on which to hang Sirota's unique harmonic colors. *Celestial Wind* is a musical interpretation of the Pentecost text from Acts 2:2–3. The images of the Holy Spirit descending as rushing wind and tongues of fire, wedded to the limitless tonal possibilities of the 151-rank Aeolian-Skinner in the cavernous acoustic of the Cathedral, provides ample inspiration for a work of compelling power.

Victoria Sirota, in addition to being canon pastor and vicar of the Congregation of St. Saviour at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, is a highly skilled organist and worthy advocate of Robert Sirota's organ music. This music requires absolute technical and rhythmic accuracy to be properly conveyed. Victoria delivers brilliantly, employing her secure, solid, virtuosic technique to convey the inner workings of the music, which she clearly understands and loves deeply. With the exception of *Letters from Abroad* and *Celestial Wind*, the works are performed on the Holtkamp organ at Peabody, which delivers clarity and color at every dynamic level. Cellist Norman Fischer is also a consummate musician who possesses a keen sense of pitch (crucial in this music!) and emotional depth that provide the appropriate pathos inherent in the *Easter Canticles*. Robert Sirota demonstrates his considerable gifts as a pianist in *Letters from Abroad*, which also requires a keen sense of rhythm and technical prowess.

Robert Sirota is a compelling musical voice of our time. This recording definitively documents some of his finest creations for the organ.

JAMES HILDRETH