

THE DIAPASON

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Celestial Wind, Organ Works by Robert Sirota. Victoria Sirota, organ, Norman Fischer, cello, and Robert Sirota, piano. Albany Records, Troy1502, \$16.99, www.albanyrecords.com.

Celestial Wind is the first recording to feature several of Robert Sirota's liturgical works for the organ. Although he has had a long association with the instrument, Sirota has composed only a small body of solo music for the organ. The works presented here draw from both his sacred and secular compositions. All the selections were written for his wife, the Reverend Dr. Victoria Sirota, a concert artist of high caliber.

Sirota himself describes the opening *Toccata* (1979) as his most difficult work for organ. The opening five-note motive comes from an unspecified arioso by J. S. Bach. The multi-sectioned piece requires virtuoso technique and a versatile instrument. One immediately hears Sirota's neo-classic bent in the tightly controlled counterpoint as well as piquant harmonies.

Four Pieces for Organ (1975), written for the dedication of a Bozeman-Gibson organ in East Northport, New York, are brief selections intended to demonstrate the tonal possibilities of this small but versatile instrument. Once again, Sirota's penchant for counterpoint is immediately obvious, as is his fascination with syncopated rhythmic figures. The composer refers to the final piece as a "negative" toccata, one which, instead of building to a climax, disintegrates into a quiet peroration.

Commissioned in 1993 by cellist Norman Fischer, *Easter Canticles* is a triptych of pieces inspired by an iconostasis of the Orthodox Church, which depicts scenes of Christ's agony in the garden, death on the cross, and miraculous resurrection.

Letters Abroad, for organ and piano, may be the most personal work on this recording. Written in the summer of 1980, these works are "musical postcards" Sirota wrote to his wife while she was away in Europe doing research. According to the composer, "Piano and organ are a potentially difficult combination; and that is the point. The acoustic disparity and distance . . . is the central metaphor of the work." The piece concludes with a tender moment of unity for the two instruments.

The final three selections are liturgical. The *Two Lenten Chorale Preludes* use the familiar tunes HERZLIEBSTER JESU and AN WASSERFLÜSSEN BABYLON. The title track, *Celestial Wind*, uses Acts 2:2-3 as its inspiration, a text that dramatically describes the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost. The images of rushing winds, tongues of fire, and the descending Spirit can be heard in the powerful and vivid sounds of the organ.

This recording features two distinct instruments: a Holtkamp organ housed at the Peabody Conservatory (for *Toccata, Four Pieces, Easter Canticles, and Two Lenten Preludes*) and the Aeolian-Skinner organ in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York (*Letters Abroad* and *Celestial Wind*). Both instruments and spaces were chosen for the repertoire. The Holtkamp, with its German-style specification, is especially appropriate for the *Toccata* with its neo-classical bent and for the *Four Pieces*, which make use of *Klangfarbenmelodie*. The rich, romantic sounds of the Aeolian-Skinner and the large, spacious acoustic of St. John add poignancy to the physical separation that inspired *Letters Abroad*, and allow for the colorful expression of the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Sirota's notes state that the piece was written for "a grand organ in a majestic space."

Victoria Sirota's performances demonstrate her solid technical skills, her consummate musicality, and her intimate understanding of her husband's compositions. Truly a match made in heaven.