

Title of CD: *20th Century Art Songs*

Personnel: Dr. Luke Spence - Trumpet, Andrew Welch - piano

Name of Record Label: Tönsehen

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Reviewed by: Dr. Steven Roberts

Luke Spence is second trumpet of the Washington Chamber Orchestra and is a member of the Anima Brass. He has played with many regional orchestras, touring with theater companies, performed period music with chamber orchestras, and played new music across the U.S., Europe, and China. He is also on the faculty at Frostburg State University and Frederick Community College. Spence received his Bachelor of Music from Oberlin Conservatory of Music under the mentorship of Roy Poper. He holds a Doctorate of Musical Arts and a Master of Music from the University of Maryland School of Music where he studied under Chris Gekker. His dissertation *Preserving the Narrative of 20th Century Art Song: A Guide for Instrumental Transcriptions of Vocal Music* offers a window into the inspiration for this first CD.

Spence's debut solo album "20th Century Art Songs" takes pieces originally written for voice and piano and translates them into trumpet or cornet language. Pianist Andrew Welch is a fitting partner on the album, matching the trumpet player's phrasing with an array of well-timed finesse and power. Spence's goal is to highlight the vocal capabilities of the instrument and he even suggests in the liner notes that trumpeters may have a phrasing edge because of their ability to sustain sound for a longer time without breathing. His choice of repertoire takes us through French, German, and English art songs from the likes of Mahler and Larsen and helps to expand the repertoire for the modern classical trumpet player.

Spence plays with a rich warm tone throughout and is a true expert in phrasing. Listening to the songs is enhanced by watching his produced videos on YouTube. While the audio tracks are beautiful and well-crafted on their own, the music takes on more meaning with the translated poetry running across the bottom of the screen. Spence includes QR codes to read the translations separately, or you can watch them along with the duo performing on YouTube.

The album starts off with three songs by Gustav Mahler and one by Alma Mahler. Spence begins the first song *Rückert-Lieder: Ich atmet' einen linden Duft* with a very clear, soft tone that warms up slowly as he continues through the piece and employs subtle, tasteful vibrato. The second track is much of the same but allows Spence to pull his phrasing in more dramatic directions. The third track, taken almost painfully slow, is much darker, slower and more melancholy than the first two and allows him to explore his robust lower register. While these are beautiful songs and are expertly performed, a recital artist would likely start to lose the audience at this point. Spence however, is clearly playing the long game with his programming and sets the album up in large segments. Thankfully Alma Mahler's *Fünf Gesänge: Lobgesang* initially rings of the same style, but transitions into a more fiery, passionate theme; definitely a welcome change of pace at this point in the album. This piece finishes with a triumphant piano cadence and would program well on a recital.

The album continues into a more modern segment featuring two songs by Alban Berg and one by Arnold Schönberg. These pieces are much more technically difficult and angular but are similarly melancholy and foreboding. These very short Berg songs are much more violent and temperamental and keep the listener engaged. The second Berg song, *Schliesse mir die Augen beide*, is technically difficult and incorporates large leaps that Spence executes very precisely. Schönberg's *Zwei Lieder: Am Strande* has one of the trickiest piano accompaniments on the album and is reminiscent of the Hindemith Sonata. The trumpet part, while dramatic and strident, is somewhat simpler than the piano accompaniment.

The next set of songs by French composers launches the album in a slightly different direction. Boulanger's *Quatre chants pour voix et piano: Attente* begins almost like a 20th century Broadway song but then takes a less consonant twist. Spence's playing is delicate and nuanced. His high register is strong and unwavering. Much like the previous selections, it was very short and had an abrupt ending. Messiaen's *Trois mélodies: Le sourire* has the most minimal orchestration on the album, exploring colors with not much activity by the trumpet or piano. In stark contrast, Ravel's *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée: Chanson à boire* that follows offers much more action and a Spanish flare which later gives in to a playful motive. Finishing off the French composer portion of the album, Poulenc gives us a hopeful, strident vocalise offering balance with the earlier dirges. A much-needed reprieve.

The album ends off with a set of songs by American composers highlighted by two movements of Libby Larsen's *Love After 1950*. These songs portray the hopeful, triumphant sound one would associate with an action movie soundtrack mixed with splashes of dissonance and humor. Ives' *Soliloquy* begins with a one note theme and graduates into a bombastic interval study by the end of the short piece. *The Housatonic at Stockbridge* similarly starts simply and slowly incorporates dissonance as the perfect seasoning. In Larsen's *Love After 1950: Boy's Lips* Spence uses lip bends and slides and really captures the "back alley jazz" spirit of the song. This song has classic jazz lines though through a distorted lens, like Gershwin on acid. The second Larsen song *Love After 1950: Big Sister Says 1967* is fast and spirited. This piece is a true gem! It's humor and spirit make it a well-chosen closer for the album.

Despite being slow-moving, this album is a great addition to the trumpet repertoire and shows Spence's virtuosic vocal style on the trumpet. For years trombonists have had a much greater array of songs to choose from and this may help to even the score.

About the Reviewer:

Dr. Steven Roberts is associate professor of jazz studies and trumpet at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Previously, he was assistant professor of trumpet and jazz at Mars Hill College after holding a similar position at Iowa State University. He is an active teacher and

freelance musician and has performed with Marcus Roberts, Kirk Whalum, Martha and the Vandellas, Vincent DiMartino, Ryan Anthony, Jon Faddis, Allen Vizzutti, Cecil and Deedee Bridgewater, Chip McNeill, Jim Pugh, Charo and many others. He holds a B.M. from Oberlin Conservatory of Music and a M.M. and D.M.A. from the University of Illinois.