

“To the Mart of Dreams: Songs by Kathleen Lockhart Manning (1890-1951) Vol. 1”

Jane Foster, soprano, and Carla Mariani, piano. Produced by George Blood Audio, Philadelphia, PA; reproduced by KLARITY Multimedia

By Diane Follet

Philadelphia artists Jane Foster and Carla Mariani have collaborated on this album of song. If, as its title suggests, this is the first of a multi-volume project, it is an ambitious and worthy undertaking. The 35 songs on this CD are captivating.

Composer Kathleen Lockhart was born in 1890 in Hollywood, California. Her musical talent emerged early, as she began playing piano and composing at age five. She traveled the world, studying in Paris, debuting at Covent Garden, and performing in London with the Hammerstein Opera Company. She returned to the United States just prior to World War I. Lockhart was affiliated with the National Federation of Music Clubs, which provided an audience for her music. When she married Ned Manning, a wealthy businessman, her livelihood no longer depended on a musical career, and she ceased promoting her works. Nonetheless, she was the first woman to have an opera auditioned by the Metropolitan Opera Company, and her songs were published by Carl Fischer and G. Schirmer. Kathleen Lockhart Manning died in 1951 at the age of 60.

Manning's affinity for the voice is apparent in these songs, for which she wrote her own texts. The text-setting is elegant, mostly syllabic, but for important words, the music bends and stretches to accommodate a drawing-out of the text. Fluid melodies result from surprising sequences of intervals that pique the ear. Manning's conventional harmonies are sprinkled with dissonance for effect.

The title of the CD is taken from the opening line (“To the mart of dreams I will take my wares...”) of the song on the first track, “Illusion,” from *Vignettes*. The collection is not conceived as a song cycle, and the second selection from *Vignettes*, “Departed,” appears on the penultimate track and serves as the composer's moving musical farewell to her husband. All of the songs are brief, ranging from 41 seconds to 2:45 minutes, but each is a miniature gem.

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Soprano Jane Foster renders the songs with intelligence and grace. She effectively colors her voice to highlight the text or play a role. Foster's diction is excellent, and intelligibility is crucial, since the texts are not included in the liner notes. To this listener's ear, Foster's voice is better at a softer dynamic; otherwise, a vigorous vibrato threatens the stability of the pitch. Pianist Carla Mariani performs with clarity and sensitivity, providing textural variety while supporting the singer.

Five of the collections reference places: *Sketches of New York*, *Japanese Ghost Songs*, *Sketches of Paris*, *Sketches of London* and *Chinese Impressions*. It is not clear if Manning actually visited these places, but she evokes a convincing atmosphere for each of them. Manning moves through a variety of moods within every collection, primarily by changing tempo and texture. Of the collections for which a date is given, *Sketches of New York*, composed in 1936, is the most recent. The songs have a contemporary edge and are vaguely reminiscent of Charles Ives in their musical language and compactness of expression. Pentatonic scales pervade *Japanese Ghost Songs* and *Chinese Impressions*. In “The Lamplighter” from *Sketches of Paris*, Manning references a nursery rhyme, sung by soprano Jane Foster in a credible child-like voice. The most charming and imaginative set is *The Tale a Garden Told (Burlesque en Miniature)*. A different vegetable speaks in each song, and Manning's musical imagery captures the humor inherent in such a situation. Vocally, this may be the most rewarding set, as Foster excels at characterizing each vegetable with a different voice. The final track, “Prayer,” is a fervent expression of faith that brings the recording to a satisfying close.

When I began this review, Kathleen Manning was unknown to me. The more I listen to her work, the more I hear. I am struck by the breadth of her musical language and her ability to effectively portray a place, a mood, or a character in the space between voice and piano, all in less than three minutes time. Foster and Mariani are to be commended for bringing life to these songs. Their efforts have resulted in a CD that encapsulates the marvelous music of Kathleen Manning.

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