

## OPERA NEWS

Joshua Rosenblum

**Tara Hugo: "Sings Philip Glass", Trevor Gureckis, conductor and arranger**

Philip Glass's distinctive and voluminous oeuvre of long (sometimes very long) forms makes it easy to overlook his work in short forms. This disc of Glass songs — most of them three or four minutes long — is an illuminating cross section of the brilliant and beautiful work he has generated as a songwriter. It helps considerably that his exponent here is Tara Hugo, an expressive, warm-voiced singing actor. Hugo was a standout in Glass's *Book of Longing*, the composer's theatrical song cycle of Leonard Cohen poems, which had an international tour and resulted in a recording in 2007. Indeed, three of the twelve tracks here are from that work, and four others are Hugo's own texts. She's a poetic, insightful writer, but she sings all of these songs — not just her own — as if they were deeply personal expressions. Her slightly craggy, cabaret-style mezzo has a lived-in quality that envelops the listener with the comfort and reassurance of experience. In reference to the *Book of Longing* in particular, Glass has stated that his intention in setting Cohen's verses to music was to make sure the words were projected as clearly as possible. How felicitous that Hugo sings as if every word is indeed worth hearing.

Hearing these songs reminds one of Glass's remarkable knack for just the right harmonic turn on the right word or phrase. His trademark cycling arpeggios are in evidence, but when deployed in these songs, they seem like singularly appropriate accompaniments, not just a stylistic tic. All of the songs are in minor, but they manage to be distinctive nonetheless — it took me until Track 9 ("Cabin in the Rockies," from *Hydrogen Jukebox*, which uses poetry of Allen Ginsberg) to feel like the composer was starting to retread the same ground. But even this one has a few surprise harmonic dissonances, and Hugo sounds particularly lovely on a medium-high descant that frames the song.

The *Book of Longing*'s "A Sip of Wine" remains a standout number; it's hard to imagine a more poignant musical setting of Cohen's line "And oh my love, I still recall/the pleasures that we knew;/the rivers and the waterfall/wherein I bathed with you" than Glass's, as delivered with boundless poignancy by Hugo. The restless "Planctus," an attractive collaboration with Natalie Merchant that evokes Astor Piazzola, is, with its Latin text, the only song not in English. "Feeding Frenzy," something of a protest song, has a driving eighth-note accompaniment that frequently doubles the vocal melody rather than providing a chordal harmonization. Hugo's socially relevant text ("One percent thinks up/Ways to wake up/Lust and Envy so they'll rake-up"), with references to Benghazi and Tucson, seems very up-to-the-minute. The meditative and lyrical opening number, with the Cummings-esque title "Always Neverwas," sets the tone for the collection very effectively, straddling the worlds of classical and indie-pop. The bridge, with its piano and plucked string accompaniment, is especially lovely. Trevor Gureckis's arrangements, mostly for small, piano-based instrumental ensembles, are spot-on. This is an unusually winning artistic collaboration, and a source of considerable musical enjoyment.