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A 'revelatory' new release of the music of Leon Kirchner



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American composer Leon Kirchner was born on January 24, 1919 and died at the age of 90 on September 17, 2009. Next week his birthday will be celebrated with the release of a new recording that includes compositions never before published or recorded, as well as other rarely recorded works. Kirchner's name currently brings up 56 hits on Amazon.com, a rather modest number that does not include a pre-order page for this new CD. However, this recording, entitled *Revelations*, is available for download from ClassicsOnline, where the total number of available

recordings of his work is even more modest.

This is rather a change from my student days, when there were more adventurous record producers taking an interest in Kirchner's work. I was an announcer at the MIT campus radio station, and our library had several of these recordings. I may have been one of the few to broadcast them. However, they were available and tended to be consistently fascinating, at least for those interested more in serious listening than in mere background ambience. This happened to be the time when Kirchner won the 1967 Pulitzer Prize for his third string quartet, which included "electronic accompaniment" on a tape that had been produced by his former student, Morton Subotnick, using a Buchla Synthesizer. (This was when Subotnick was working on the material for his own all-electronic recording, *Silver Apples of the Moon*.)

All this is a way of saying that, for many, *Revelations* is likely to be a "first contact" experience with Kirchner's music, rather than "revelations" of previously known aspects of his work. Either way, the recording has much to offer. The primary artist is pianist Joel Fan, and he performs solo compositions that cover the period from 1949 to 2006. Over this span of six decades the listener encounters a progression from the miniatures of the *Little Suite* in five movements, all of which are shorter than a minute and 30 seconds, to the more extended "The Forbidden," which is slightly longer than nine minutes. This latter work is a reflection on Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, whose devil character dismisses the constructs of music of the past as "forbidden" when he strikes his bargain with the fictitious composer Adrian Leverkühn.

The remaining selections are vocal. Fan accompanies soprano Diana Hoagland in three songs (each based on a text by a different author) composed between 1943 and 1946. He then accompanies soprano Beverly Hoch in the 1962 *The Twilight Stood*, a cycle of six poems by Emily Dickinson. He also accompanies a choir assembled by Scott Dunn in "Dawn." Composed between 1943 and 1946, this is a setting of a poem by Federico García Lorca translated into English by Rolf Humphries. The choir also gives an a cappella performance of the 1966 "Words from Wordsworth," which uses fragments from that poet's "The Tables Turned" and "Intimations of Immortality."

There is considerable diversity in Kirchner's approach to vocal resources. The earlier works reflect the sort of rhetorical tropes that occupied many American composers in the Forties. The Dickinson settings, on the other hand, are far more distinctive, placing virtuoso demands on the soprano to tap into the intense emotional undercurrents of the poet's words.

Whether or not this recording is revelatory will probably depend on how much background knowledge is brought to the listening experiences. Those unfamiliar with Kirchner's work will certainly be struck by that aforementioned diversity. However, because each of these compositions works on a relatively brief scale of duration, each of the stages of that diversity is remarkably accessible. This may be because, even when he was not explicitly setting text, Kirchner had a sense of literary discourse through which his music would get beyond the more "mathematical" abstractions that composers like Anton Webern inspired in Kirchner's contemporaries.

This music definitely deserves the attention of serious listeners, and the anniversary of his birth next week would be an excellent occasion to engage that attention.

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