



MONK Basket Rondo. SALZMAN Jukebox in the Tavern of Love
Western Wind Voc Ens
LABOR 7094 (47:44)

This disc pairs a commissioned work by Meredith Monk, one of the few pieces she did not write for her own vocal ensemble first, with a similarly unusual piece by Eric Salzman. The result is one of the oddest yet most refreshing discs I've heard in years, particularly since this Monk piece is one of her real gems.

For those unfamiliar with Monk's work, she writes wordless, polyphonic, rhythmic fantasias for voices, using syllabic sounds to color and emphasize the rhythm (open vowels for long-held notes, consonants for syncopated passages). Her masterpiece, to date, is her two-hour opera *Atlas*, but *Basket Rondo* is certainly one of her most fascinating and engaging pieces. I was fascinated by Salzman's description in the liner notes how *Basket Rondo* came together as a piece and a performance: "she gave thematic material—orally or on tape—to the members of the group and then guided them in improvisation based on this material. After each session, Monk spent time alone composing new material and refining the overall form. The piece was constantly changing, sometimes substantially at each meeting....The entire process ... had more in common with the creation and evolution of a jazz composition or a piece of choreography." There are some unusual vocal effects in *Basket Rondo* that I don't recall hearing even in most of Monk's previous work. The only thing I didn't like about it was the fade-out ending. Even in jazz performances, I consider fade-out endings to be a bit of a cop-out.

Jukebox in the Tavern of Love begins with a strange narration about an attractive nun (Sister Sorella) singing a "Dies irae," then goes into a description of the strange characters who come into the bar. The vocal music has words (written by Valeria Vasilevski), but since most of them are sung by a hooty countertenor, not all of them are understandable. But the music is a lot of fun to listen to, based somewhat on Monk's aesthetic, somewhat on polyphonic madrigals, but all of it constantly evolving and morphing. After the nun, there follows first a dancer singing nonsense lyrics in a peculiar rhythm, then a tune titled "When I romp with my baby tonight" that begins as a solo but becomes a fugue when other voices enter one at a time. Weird stuff, but good weird stuff! Next comes the song of a rabbi, "Do you know what a DP (displaced person) is?" This, too, evolves into its own polyphony as he describes how he wanted to become a Jesuit priest: "You can't; you're Jewish ... a Jewish Jesuit will never do!" The nun then tells the story of her late aunt, who left her a pile of love letters and a confession that she was a lesbian. The poet sings a toast to love in all its forms, then a four-part madrigal (led by the rabbi) on the words "Salute amore" before the Con Ed worker (Consolidated Edison, the New York power and light company, for those who may need a translator) drinks and sings a toast to love: "Wine is the balm of lovers, come pour a cup for me....Awaken, lovers, listen!" It's a wonderful, enchanting piece, difficult to put into words. You really have to hear it to appreciate it.

This is, so far, my Best New Record of 2014. Get it! **Lynn René Bayley**