

***Glass Houses, Vol. 2.*** Music by Ann Southam. Christina Petrowska Quilico, piano. Toronto, ON: Centrediscs CMCCD 20114, 2014. 1 compact disc (53:45). Contents: Glass Houses no. 14 (7:19) — Glass Houses no. 11 (11:31) — Glass Houses no. 15 (9:05) — Glass Houses no. 10 (8:58) — Glass Houses no. 12 (7:01) — Glass Houses no. 8 (9:54).

When Ann Southam died in 2010, she made headline news by the generous \$14 million donation from her estate to the Canadian Women’s Foundation—the single largest gift to a women’s organization in Canada. Of course, Southam left another important legacy: that of approximately fifty years of composition work. While valuable pieces can be found in many genres—save opera, a challenge that Southam never attempted—in my opinion her lasting importance will be found in her remarkable body of piano works.

Christina Petrowska Quilico is no stranger to Southam’s compositions. By her own account, she has been performing Southam’s piano music since 1981, and has recorded several substantial compositions—including the *Rivers* series (2004-2005) and *Pond Life* (a collection of twenty pieces inspired by water themes, spanning from 1979 to 2008). Further, several pieces from these two cycles as well as other miscellaneous works were written specifically for Petrowska Quilico.

*Glass Houses’* origins date from 1979. As Southam writes (the sole paragraph of notes she wrote for this CD before her death is included in the program notes), the title identifies them as minimalist music. And while Philip Glass was her initial interest in this compositional style, she quickly turned to the process-designed music of Steve Reich. Southam goes on to note that the tunes in *Glass Houses* were inspired by east coast fiddle music (she cites her childhood love of Don Messer and his Islanders as an influence). In 2009 Petrowska Quilico began revising all fifteen movements, completing the task in 2010. The pianist recorded nine movements in *Glass Houses Revisited*. The recording was nominated for a JUNO for best classical composition in 2012. Remarkably, Petrowska Quilico performed these pieces days before Southam’s death; the booklet includes a moving email by the composer to the pianist about her appreciation of these particular performances.

*Glass Houses, Vol. 2* contains the six remaining movements from the collection—in chronological sequence they are nos. 14, 11, 15, 10, 12, and 8. Each one is in a particular key and is diatonic throughout—in other words, there are no chromatic notes in any movement. Apart from the “at a fast tempo” indication in five of the fifteen movements, there are no directions in the score whatsoever (including dynamics, phrasing, articulation, etc.). Each movement opens with an eighth-note left-hand ostinato; there is variance in the number of eighth notes, from seven in movements 11 and 15 to thirty-three in movement 8. The ostinato supports a series of musical cells in the right hand, ranging from ten to twenty notes of a

combination of quarter and eighth notes; each such cell is repeated in its entirety between one to five times before moving to the next cell. Formal design is achieved with strategic returns of the opening cell, engendering a type of rondo design.

In her program notes, Petrowska Quilico refers to the movements of *Glass Houses* as etudes, with technical challenges as formidable as the Ligeti etudes and Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*. It is easy to understand her view. Both hands must play independently of each other: the left-hand ostinato and series of right-hand cells are mathematically precise, yet autonomous of each other. At the same time, the final few measures are written out for both hands, necessitating such accuracy of the prior musical journey that these final measures be completely seamless.

If I had to sum up the character of the music and performance on this disc in one word, it would be ebullience. I have rarely encountered music that is so ceaselessly optimistic in character. Given the daunting technical challenges these pieces present to the pianist, it is a testament to Petrowska Quilico's consummate mastery of the instrument and intimate understanding of Southam's compositional language that these pieces sound as effortless as they do. Further, the textures are remarkably clear, the articulations so precise, and the balance between the hands so beautifully positioned that one loses sight of the flawless musicianship required to perform these pieces; rather, one is immersed in the captivating, magical, minimalist sound-world that Southam has created.

Along with Southam's beautiful music and Petrowska Quilico's spectacular performance, full marks must be given to both David Jaeger as producer and Dennis Patterson as recording engineer for their work on this extraordinary recording. As with other Centredisc recordings, the program notes and biographies of Petrowska Quilico and Southam are in English and French. Finally, the booklet contains some touching photos of the pianist and composer together.

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