

Rachmaninov's setting of the Kreisler *Liebesleid* completes her program in a show of capricious keyboard genius. It's the kind of playing that brings audiences to their feet after encores. You can do it in the privacy of your living room – your secret will be safe with us.



This beautiful CD **Windows (Sono Luminus DSL 92218 sonoluminus.com)** is the seventh in **Bruce Levingston's** discography. The main work is Schumann's *Kinderszenen Op.15*. Levingston proves himself an artist whose first impulse is to find and reveal a composer's most fragile moments. His ability to do this is quite disarming. The best example of this is *Träumerei*. Not since Horowitz played

this as the encore in his 1986 Moscow concert near the end of his life, have I heard such playing. Words completely fail. Levingston brings this approach to the whole piece and thereby creates something quite unlike anything recorded of late.

The other works on the CD are commissions from two contemporary composers. *The Shadow of the Blackbird* by David Bruce is the program's opening piece and is very much in the character of the Schumann that follows it. It's deceptively simple yet searching and contemplative. A perfect beginning to Levingston's program.

The CD's title tracks *Windows* are James Matheson's five-movement composition inspired by the stained glass windows of Marc Chagall and Henri Matisse. Matheson uses the piano's colours very effectively in his writing. Levingston plays this in a way that draws an interpretive thread convincingly through the works of all three composers.

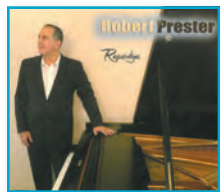


**Liza Stepanova** takes an unusual and creative approach to her new CD **Tones & Colors (Concert Artists Guild CAG 120 concertartists.org)**. Using paintings as the inspiration for her four-part program, she blends music from Bach to Ligeti into themes depicting *A Spanish Room, Nature and Impressionism, Conversations Across Time, and Wagner, Infinity and an Encore*.

It's a skillfully assembled repertoire list and beautifully played throughout. A number of tracks stand out. *El pelele* by Granados makes a brilliant opening, with its rich harmonies and sparkling writing. Stepanova has equal success with the three impressionist pieces in the second set. Fanny Hensel's *September: At the River* is especially effective.

The third set uses four pieces in the key of E-flat minor. A Bach *Prelude and Fugue BWV853*, George Crumb's *Adoration of the Magi* and a second fugue by Lyonel Feininger based on the subject used by Bach in his fugue. It's quite striking to hear how the shared key draws these disparate works so tightly together.

Stepanova begins her final set with Liszt's transcription of Wagner's *Overture to Tannhäuser*. It's magnificent playing that captures the grand scale of Wagner's work, from the solemn chorale-like opening to its towering climax. Ligeti's *Etude No.14 Infinite Column* is a devilish piece to perform and reveals Stepanova's true power at the keyboard. A graduate of Juilliard and a seasoned performer, Stepanova is one to follow in the piano world.



**Robert Prester** may be better known today as an accomplished jazz pianist, but his new CD **Robert Prester – Rapsody (robert-prester.com)** is a reminder of his many years as a young pianist absorbing the classical repertoire. The learning of this period has shaped his playing with a light and precise touch, a keen interpretive impulse focused

clearly on emotion, and a remarkable grasp of musical architecture.

This new recording contains the Beethoven *Sonata No.12 in A-flat Major Op.26* performed with a fresh and energized enthusiasm – as if it were a world premiere. Debussy's *Jardins Sous la Pluie* is an

impressive example of Prester's keyboard agility. The Bach *Prelude and Fugue No.6 in D Minor WTC Book II* is an excellent example of the musical discipline and intuition that Prester brings to all his playing.

The real gem on this disc, however, is Prester's own composition. The *Sonata in F Minor* is a fusion of classical and jazz harmonies. It adheres closely to the structure of sonata form but is deeply imbued with the harmonic clusters, intervals and rhythms we associate intimately with jazz. This mix is seamless and well balanced. If anything, it's a reminder of our enduring tendency to keep these two genres isolated in their own worlds without believing their co-mingling can produce something unique and truly beautiful.

It's a terrific recording. Visionary, successful and altogether brilliant.



**Nancy Zipay DeSalvo** presents the work of two contemporary composers in her new recording **Small Stones – Modern Piano Music (Navona Records NV 6139 navonarecords.com)**.

Jason Tad Howard's *Piano Sonata No.2* is not really a sonata in the formal sense. Rather, it explores eight short musical ideas that the composer calls *Short Shorts*, before

bringing them together in a final expression amusingly described as a *Not Quite So Short Short Short*. Despite the light humour, the work is quite substantial and at times very technically demanding. The eight pieces are varied in style and mood, and kept to less than two minutes' playing time. They tend slightly toward a minimalist form and finally emerge in the complexity of the last movement.

Daniel Perttu's *Sonata for Piano* is inspired by a visit to Stonehenge. Perttu uses many compositional devices to evoke the ancient mystery associated with this landmark: minor modes, atmospheric writing and plenty of technical exploitation of the piano's potential in evoking the moods he requires. This sonata is more challenging for the performer than the earlier work. DeSalvo handles it all with a confidence that speaks to her lifetime as a performer and teacher.

The two sonatas are a good selection and represent a fine example of contrasting approaches to contemporary piano writing.



**Lynelle James** has recorded her first solo piano CD, **Lynelle James Piano (Blue Griffin Recording BGR435 bluegriffin.com)**. She includes the Beethoven *Piano Sonata No.28 in A Major Op.101*, in which the third movement emerges as a masterpiece of deeply touching melancholy. It's a very satisfying performance that is even more thrilling for the energy that erupts in the final movement.

Her command of the keyboard is inspiring, especially in the frequent restatements of the fugal subject in the bass line.

Some of James' academic work has focused on the life and music of Russian avant-garde composer Nikolay Roslavets. It's natural that she would use her first recording to bring this lesser-known repertoire to public attention. Roslavets' *Five Preludes* reveals an ethereal and somewhat mystical language that James captures with conviction and authenticity. The music is replete with dynamic and emotional changes and moves strongly in the direction of atonality while never quite losing a tonal centre, however distant.

Her performance of the Scriabin *Sonata No.4 in F Sharp Major Op.30* is extraordinary. The two movements are of such contrasting character, it's difficult to believe they're by the same composer. James understands the core of Scriabin's expression and holds the work together wonderfully.

The Schumann *Symphonic Etudes Op.13* concludes the CD. Structured as a theme and variations, the bulk of the piece is a series of etudes on the opening idea. As such, it quickly becomes a beautiful display of keyboard technique and varied musical devices that Schumann conceived in his own brilliant way. James plays these with flair and an expansive grasp of their symphonic scale.