

DORA OHRENSTEIN
Urban Diva

COMPOSERS RECORDINGS INC. CD 654 • 1993, 74:45

Performance ★ ★ ★
Sound Quality ★ ★ ★ ★

Soprano Dora Ohrenstein gets points just for charting unfamiliar territory. She searched out (mostly) modern texts for complex female characters that would give her a broader range than the traditional diva role—something

more than simply “love and lament,” as she says in her accompanying notes. Then she paired the texts with the music of cutting edge composers like Scott Johnson, Linda Bouchard, and Anthony Davis. The result is experimental, varied, intelligent, and well worth searching out.

Certainly it will be a while before we hear Cecilia Bartoli sing, “You flick long cocks of satyrs with your tongue.” But the appeal of *Urban Diva* is hardly that of a notable soprano singing naughty or unusual lyrics. It’s the appeal of fascinating characters presented with drama.

The gripping “Calamity Jane to Her Daughter,” with music by Ben Johnston, is based on a forged diary purporting to be that of the legendary Jane Hickok. It features a steely but lonely woman who gives up her child in order to make her own way in the world and contains rambling comments, a recipe for “20 Year Cake,” and the eerie coda “forgive me & consider I was lonely.”

Other tracks, which variously feature synthesizers, percussion, piano, marimba, vibraphone, and strings, along with Ohrenstein’s

voice, are not always as successful as “Calamity Jane”—usually when the music is not sympathetic enough to the needs of the lyrics. But overall, in spite of the challenges it offers to listeners, this engaging and thoughtful repertoire is a welcome addition to the sparse catalog of new music for solo voice and instruments. —Michael Giltz