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## PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

## Songs Composed by Women, Winningly Rendered & Recorded

April 3, 2024 | By Clive Paget, *Musical America*



Will Liverman follows up 2021's [Dreams of a New Day: Songs by Black Composers](#) with an ambitious and equally impressive double disc *Show Me the Way*. An all-female composer program is echoed in the American baritone's choice of a lineup of exclusively women guest artists, ranging from Metropolitan Opera colleague J'Nai Bridges and mentor Renée Fleming to his inspirational mom, recording artist and gospel singer Terry Liverman.

The older music comes from Amy Beach, Florence Price, and Margaret Bonds. *The Beach*, a duet from her late opera *Cabildo*, would have seemed old-fashioned in 1932, but here receives a sweepingly romantic reading by Liverman and soprano Nicole Cabell. Pianist Jonathan King—excellent throughout—is joined by the silvery violin of Lady Jess. Price's songs are warmly lyrical if a little Victorian in feel. The Bonds, to texts by Edna St.

Vincent Millay, are pungent and powerful, and sung with a winning sincerity and sense of line.

The album opens with a heartfelt, soft-grained account of Bud Green & Ella Fitzgerald's "You showed me the way." It's followed by *A Sable Jubilee*, a lively triptych on the theme of Black Joy with buoyant, expressive texts by Tesia Kwarteng set to jaunty, imaginative, and uplifting music by Jasmine Barnes. Liverman commissioned the three songs and has been rewarded with a set of beguiling micro-dramas, each of which he clearly relishes.

The other major commission here, also a trilogy, is *Machine Head*, settings of Ted Burke poems by Libby Larsen. A poet, critic, and blues musician, Burke owns the iconic secondhand bookstore D.G. Wills Books, in La Jolla, CA, and his poetry reflects both his upbringing and idiosyncratic world view. In the blues "Rexall," a boy waits impatiently in a car with his father, while the title song, a witty diatribe against modern technology, features infectious boogie-woogie riffs. With his feisty, focused baritone, Liverman mines these evocative texts for all they are worth.

Songs by Sarah Kirkland Snider, Rene Orth, and Kamala Sankaram round out an enthralling and eclectic program, and Liverman concludes matters by accompanying his mom on piano in a smoky rendition of "If I can help somebody."

*I Long and Seek After* is a portrait album of New York-based violist and composer Jessica Meyer. In a relaxed and personal sleeve note, she talks about only taking up composing in her 40s (she turns 50 this year). "The combination of words and music together was the only thing that could attempt to explain or express what was going on inside me as I made efforts to find out exactly who I was," she writes.

The music here comprises miniature song cycles and solo songs wrapped around carefully chosen and evocative poetry. The opener, *Space, in Chains*, is a perfect example. Three poems by Laura Kasischke evoking the poignant travails of middle age are set for soprano voice—the diamond-toned, crisp-of-diction Melissa Wimbish—with Meyer herself on viola. Lyrical lines are dramatically astute, and the viola is put through its paces with striking effects like drumming on its body to evoke the patter of rain.

Chabelle Williams's is a touch strident in *Welcome to the Broken Hearts Club*, settings of fragmentary poems by Cleveland-born poet and musical artist Weatherspoon, but the sympathetic accompaniment for string quartet is bewitchingly done.

"Things I forgot to tell you"—its text taken from a letter by Anais Nin—is put across with great intelligence by contralto Emily Marvosh, with Meyer's viola in its most ethereal range. "The Last Rose," a haunting version of Thomas Moore's famous lyric, finds Sarah Brailey's fluid soprano underpinned by Caleb van der Swaagh's mournful cello.

The most substantial work gives the album its title. In *I Long and Seek After*, Meyer repurposes Anne Carson's translations of Sappho as a 21st-century response to Schumann's *Frauenliebe und Leben*. Beth Willer leads the excellent Lorelei Ensemble, their crystalline voices leaping, skipping, and enjoying every word while embracing the closest of harmonies and negotiating extended vocal techniques from whooping to whispering. While Schumann's cycle ends with its protagonist's dreams in tatters, Meyer's gorgeously scored conclusion with its cheeky Edith Piaf quotation aims, she says, to depict women who have "the courage to live their lives boldly, while growing older gracefully, assuredly, and proudly."

### Will Liverman

*Show Me the Way*

Will Liverman, Jonathan King, Nicole Cabell, J'Nai Bridges, Renée Fleming, Terry Liverman  
Cedille CDR90000226

### Jessica Meyer

*I Long and Seek After*

Melissa Wimbish, Jessica Meyer, Chabelle Williams, Kayleigh Butcher, Dan Schlosberg, Johnna Wu, Kobi Malkin,



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