

Related Articles			
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	<i>Issue 47:6 July/Aug 2024</i>	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	Composers	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	Huntley Dent	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	NEW FOCUS	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
		Jessica Meyer	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	Various	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	viola	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>

**Download Review by Huntley Dent**

**JESSICA MEYER** *Space, in Chains.*<sup>1</sup> *Welcome to the Broken Hearts Club.*<sup>2</sup> *Things I forgot to tell you.*<sup>3</sup> *On fire ... no, after you.*<sup>4</sup> *The Last Rose. I long and seek after* • <sup>1-4</sup>Jessica Meyer (va); Various performers • NEW FOCUS 398 (Download: 56:59 [🔊](#))

No one is better placed to write about the irrationality and desperation of love than a woman who is as rational and centered as the New York-based composer Jessica Meyer. She is alive to the finest shades of love but comments on it, musically and in prose, with mature intelligence. The formula for writing about runaway emotion goes back to Wordsworth’s definition of poetry. “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ... recollected in tranquility.” In this collection of art songs written since 2016, Meyer sets five women poets linked by their experience of keenly suffering and feeling ecstatic in love (the sole male poet is the Romantic Irish writer Thomas Moore, whose lifetime closely overlapped Wordsworth’s).

Love is the primary subject in the great Lieder tradition, to which Meyer adds a contemporary twist: the search for identity. This became her personal quest after she turned 40, and the six works on the program are poised between one woman’s sense of self, other women’s, and love as an eternal force beyond anyone’s control. The tone of the texts ranges from the aching lesbian love of Sappho to Moore’s sentimental “The Last Rose of Summer” and the psychological intimacy, at times confessional, of contemporary women writers.

A touchstone piece is *Things I forgot to tell you*, which sets a 1932 letter from Anaïs Nin to Henry Miller in the midst of one of the century’s legendary romances. Nin begins casually addressing an everyday matter, but she quickly turns to her obsessive love, insisting

*That I love you.*

*That I love you.*

*That I love you.*

*I have become an idiot like Gertrude Stein. That’s what love does to intelligent women.*

Meyer is an accomplished violist—she teaches both viola and chamber music at the Manhattan School of Music—and this piece is an intense, often agitated, duo for viola and voice. As the program notes explain, “The violist serves to tell the story of the text, from using harmonics as if they are instead playing an indigenous flute, to a series of florid and passionate gestures to express that moment when one is blind to anything else but the built-up fantasy of how one perceives the situation.”

The music is brilliantly performed by Meyer as violist (she appears in four works on the program) and contralto Emily Marvosh. Although there is plenty of individuality throughout the program, *Things I forgot to tell you* points to some telltale elements: the voice of an intelligent woman looking at herself in the mirror of self-awareness, a strong narrative line in the music, an eclectic but essentially tonal idiom, and great sensitivity to the words.

Whether she is using a richly scored string quartet (in *Welcome to the Broken Hearts Club*) or a solitary, teary cello (in *The Last Rose*), Meyer is unusually respectful, among contemporary composers, of the writer, giving priority to the mood of the verse. This places her, however different her music might be, in the tradition of song from Schubert to Hugo Wolf. Speaking of poet Jennifer Beattie’s verse in *On fire ... no, after you*, Meyer says, “It is about that moment when you realize you have fallen in love and that breathless-passionate-yet-anxiously-fragile feeling that can overwhelm you in the early stages of such a relationship.”

I have to admire, and single out, such exquisite expression, which Meyer translates into equally exquisite music. But it is her wide range of emotions, to the verge of the unhinged, that deserves the highest appreciation. I’ve abbreviated the headnote because these six vocal works each enlist different singers and instrumentalists, but uniformly the performances are first-rate. I especially appreciate how clearly the singers, all accomplished professionals, enunciate English with unusual clarity. Complete texts are provided, and the recorded sound is exemplary. Really astonishing is the vocal variety and virtuosity of the *a cappella* women’s chorus, the Lorelei Ensemble, that performs the album’s title work, *I long and seek after*.

There’s always a need to boost art song, a small genre in contemporary American music that often gets neglected by record labels and general listeners. There’s good reason to be skittish—New Music tends to be too strange for words, or at least for words to register very deeply. Meyer’s songs are a welcome exception. The appeal of this album extends to adventurous listeners who already love Lieder and other traditions of art song. **Huntley Dent**

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Related Articles			
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	<i>Issue 47:6 July/Aug 2024</i>	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	Composers	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	Huntley Dent	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	NEW FOCUS	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
		Jessica Meyer	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	Various	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>
<a href="#">First</a>	<a href="#">Prev</a>	viola	<a href="#">Next</a> <a href="#">Last</a>

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