

TALKING BROADWAY

Sound Advice

A spirited Irving Berlin selection ...
plus pre-election *Celebrating American Spirit*

October 25, 2012

We've got three discs on the CD player, and the name of composer-lyricist Irving Berlin is very much around. There's a London cast album of a production adding various Berlin songs to the score of a classic film. And some of the same titles appear on a studio sampling of his work by a trio of songsters. Lastly, two Berlin pieces are among those to appear on an album focused on U.S. presidents and patriotism by a chorus and two guest stars from Broadway.



ESSENTIAL VOICES USA
JUDITH CLURMAN, CONDUCTOR
WITH GUESTS KELLI O'HARA & RON RAINES
CELEBRATING THE AMERICAN SPIRIT
Sono Luminus

If the backbiting, news bytes and endless debates about debates are getting to you this election season, an inspiring and striking musicalized reminder of what America is supposed to be about awaits your fair hearing. Being released next week, *Celebrating the American Spirit* is no simple rah-rah flag-waving exercise nor a feeble band-aid for the bruised country. With gorgeous harmonies and soaring vocal chorale sounds, *Essential Voices USA*, conducted by Judith Clurman, is a mixed group of skilled singers who bring thoughtful and rich performances to some familiar patriotic pieces in new settings and introduce us to newly commissioned items. There are glorious sounds here—instrumentally, and in compositions, too—and the whole project glows with intelligence and dignity, with restraint and simplicity where others might be tempted to go for overkill and cliché.

Musical theatre followers will be especially interested in the participation of two stars who each make two guest appearances and some representation of songwriters from the genre. That patriot of Broadway, Irving Berlin, is represented by two of his pieces. The perhaps inevitable "God Bless America" caps the CD with the Voices joining Kelli O'Hara in a pensive treatment that becomes more like the "solemn prayer" referenced in the last line of the introductory verse. And it's also a grand showcase for the different strengths of her voice—the simple purity, tenderness, and an exciting, strong and high soprano showcase for the ending. From Berlin's Broadway show *Mr. President*, Ron Raines relaxes amiably into the homespun humor (if your home is at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue) with "It Gets Lonely in The White House," which here includes some of Berlin's lyrics not heard on the cast album. Kelli O'Hara's other piece is from the musical by Leonard Bernstein and Alan Jay Lerner whose title is the aforementioned street address and her "Take Care of This House" is lovely and serious—and fervent without pushing the envelope. In "Reason to Be Thankful" ("Tis America That I Call Home"), Raines, with his deep tones, persuasively sings Sheldon Harnick's lyric to a melody by Broadway orchestrator Larry

Hochman, who contributes to several pieces on the CD as arranger, player, adapter or composer. The dignity of the Raines and O'Hara pieces is anchored by mood-setting, focused instrumental work, with jazz/cabaret/etc. piano accompanist-in-demand (and command) Tedd Firth notable here. Marc Shaiman's movie theme from The American President is heard with words penned by Ramsey McClean, titled "A Seed of Grain."

Theatre composers Andrew Lippa, Jason Robert Brown and Georgia Stitt are among the musicians who set the words of 16 of the United States' Presidents to music in an evolving piece called "Sing Out, Mr. President." Most of the sections are about a minute long and glorify a memorably pithy sentence attributed to one of our Chief Executives. They often take the forms of rounds or canons, with the line repeated overlappingly in different voicings, a motto or watchcry ("We have nothing to fear but fear itself" among the more famed lines) becoming an art song by the male and female voices in various configurations.

Reverent, rhapsodic or restless with yearning, the Essential Voices rarely sound pat or inaccessible. It is easy to get swept up in the majesty and swirls of vocal blends and the solo voices within the chorus that pierce through. In the complex layering, it may be difficult to catch all the words, but many (including those Presidential lines) are in a booklet which also gives the backgrounds and credits for the works and their writers. This may not be an album one plays every day, but it's not every day we think of Lincoln or Reagan as "lyricists" of a sort.

- Rob Lester