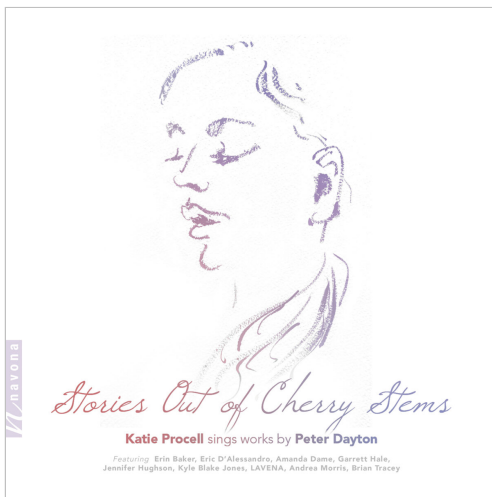


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DAYTON: *Stories Out of Cherry Stems*

CD Procell; various instrumentalists. Texts and translations. Navona Records NV6424



THE IMAGINATIVE BALTIMORE-BASED

COMPOSER Peter Dayton and the fearless, versatile young soprano Katie Procell join forces here for an unusual album of vocal chamber music. Procell sings four of Dayton's song cycles, accompanied by, variously, a solo cello, a solo saxophone, a quartet of woodwinds and the Debussyan combination of flute, viola and harp. Dayton continually creates fresh and interesting sounds with these forces, while Procell enthusiastically illuminates his idiosyncratic explorations with her gleaming soprano.

The first cycle, *Entwine Our Tongues: Sapphic Fragments*, uses texts by Jordi Alonso, which are restorations and completions of surviving snippets by Sappho. Dayton immediately places us in an otherworldly

soundscape with upwardly swooping figures for a pair of oboes and a pleasingly modal but high-lying vocal line. The third piece in the set is lean and spare, with an instrumental intro for clarinet, bass clarinet and English horn. "Should I get the girl I want to taste the daughter of the vine so that I might take her home?" the poet asks. The introspective, brooding pace and discordant harmonies reflect the distress of indecision. In the fourth, the bouncy, playful rhythm sounds like the poet is nervously making excuses to avoid a romantic encounter she's unsure about. There's no hesitation in the fifth song, however: "I shall enter desire desiring—desiring to desire and having desired / that my desires coincide with yours." This one, sung entirely *a cappella*, is rangy and angular but also mellifluous and enveloping, especially in Procell's lush, confident performance.

Si Solamente ("If Only") is a three-song collection for soprano and cello, with texts by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Dayton shows a keen ear for the possibilities of this unusual duet combination. "Barcarola," the most substantial song of the set, begins with the familiar rocking 6/8 feel of a barcarolle, rendered here with unconventional double-stops in the solo cello. The whole piece is tinged with regret and loneliness amid vivid seaside imagery. Procell and cellist Lavena discover astringent beauty in the dissonances, which conjure the emotional churning of an isolated soul.

The third cycle, *Lost Daughter: Songs on the Myth of Persephone*, explores aspects of motherhood and grief. Four of the five songs, with texts by Rita Dove, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Louise Glück, and Dayton (an adaptation of a Tennyson poem) address the Persephone myth directly, while the first piece is a setting of Oscar Wilde's "Requiescat," written to mourn the death of his little sister when she was only nine years old. The song begins with an oscillating whole step ostinato in the harp, like melancholy treading through a cemetery. It's by turns cheerful and desolate, but ultimately heartbreaking. The text to the closing piece is Glück's lit-crit-style musings on the Persephone myth, and mostly spoken: "Is she a born wanderer, in other

words / an existential replica of her own mother / less hamstrung by ideas of causality?" The ending, however, is sung, in Procell's ethereal delivery.

The final cycle is a setting for soprano and alto sax (played by Kyle Blake Jones) of Max Ehrmann's "Desiderata" from 1927, a collection of self-help bromides in the form of a prose poem. Dayton has divided these into ten short movements, most of which are between one and three sentences long. The second one begins, "Speak your truth quietly and clearly," which is a good description of how Procell renders these epigrammatic and memorable pieces. Dayton says he assigned himself the task of setting one of these miniatures every day during the pandemic. Hearing them is an excellent way to encounter Ehrmann's words of wisdom and realize how startlingly relevant they remain today. —*Joshua Rosenblum*