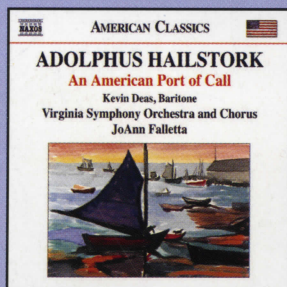
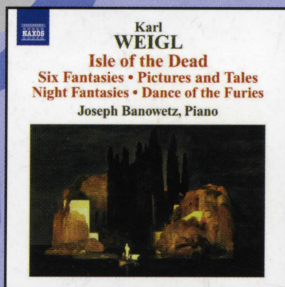


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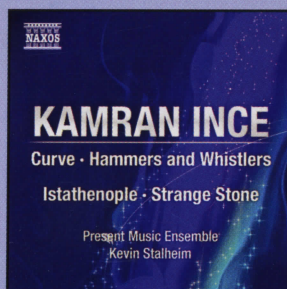
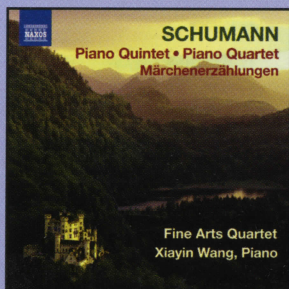
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Janfare

The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors



Nine From Naxos



Christopher Brodersen, in reviewing a previous release of di Lisa's Scarlatti, noted of soprano Adrianna Fernandez that she possesses "a crystal-clear sound and flawless technique" (*Fanfare* 34:5). I haven't heard that particular album (CPO 777476), but find her performance here not up to that exalted standard. The chest voice is solid, with good resonance, but the tone thins moderately in the higher register, at least while singing at less than full volume. Moving from the lower to the higher register, especially at faster tempos, sometimes results in flattened intonation. She also lacks a trill, and uses the old trick of intensifying her vibrato to sound like one. Though florid singing isn't that important here, her agility is up to handling what's provided, and she's alive to the dramatic changes of each person she portrays. The sound is full and rich for the orchestra, but at times a bit wan and faded for Fernandez, as though she were distanced from the microphone. But with performances this good in general, of music that is truly excellent, you really can't go wrong.

I don't mean to end on a sour note, but still—under 50 minutes of music? Surely CPO could have done better than that. Even if di Lisa and his musicians didn't have more content available, something fitting from the period should have been in the recording company's library, released or not, and added to provide value.

That aside, strongly recommended. **Barry Brenesal**

Gisèle Becker, Cantate Chamber Singers, and the Art of Collaboration

BY RONALD E. GRAMES

Until recently, only those who follow the artistic scene in the Washington, D.C./Montgomery County, Maryland, area would have likely heard of the Cantate Chamber Singers. Consisting of 32–35 auditioned singers, and often found collaborating with area schools, ensembles, and artists, it has been a major advocate of the choral arts in its region since 1984. Cantate has a loyal base of supporters, presents concerts of works from a wide range of periods and styles, and has been hailed by its local press for the quality of its work and the sense of adventure that it brings to its programming. A quick look at the upcoming programs listed on its website cantate.org gives some idea of the imagination and range of the concerts. Cantate is known for commitment to new music, and has fostered its creation with commissioning projects and composer residencies.

Cantate, under the direction of Gisèle Becker, has recently gained wider recognition through the release of two CDs of three contemporary works, all but one of them new works created for the chorus. These releases, one each on the Naxos and Albany labels, offer a setting of large sections of Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* by Maurice Saylor, an extravagantly eclectic wedding cantata, *A Crown of Stars*, by Andrew Earle Simpson, and the comparably polystylistic Alfred Schnittke Requiem.

Becker, who spends most of her professional time as the director of choral activities at George Washington University—she conducts the University Singers and Chamber Choir—began our interview with some background on Cantate Chamber Singers and how she came to lead it.

"I first worked with Cantate Chamber Singers in the winter/spring of 1994. Its founding director, Phyllis Isaacson, a Washington-area jazz pianist and conductor, had founded the group ten years prior. Consistent with her background, the focus of the group under Isaacson's leadership had been primarily jazz and lighter classical standards, and performances of Handel's *Messiah* that became a near-annual tradition. Her husband's retirement from the government prompted their move north to Vermont and created a potential vacancy for the music directorship of Cantate. This produced something of a crisis for the group, as Isaacson had previously handled all financial and administrative duties. To their credit, the singers formed the first Board of Directors and proceeded to conduct a search for a new director.

"My vision for the group began to be realized as the natural attrition of veterans enabled the involvement of new singers. I was then able to hone the sound and ultimate musical product to fit

my own aesthetic. Trying to compete in the very active choral community of Washington, D.C., inspired me to seek out a niche we could call our own. Commissioning new works and performing underexposed masterworks of the existing choral repertoire has become my vision for Cantate, and I am so pleased that we are receiving recognition for innovative programming through awards and recording opportunities. It is our duty to utilize the great gifts we have in our living, working composers in order to provide the next generation of repertoire that can stand beside the existing pillars of Bach, Brahms, Britten, and others.”

Though the standard repertoire for smaller chorus is not exactly ignored in upcoming concerts—there is a concert of Britten and Purcell planned in the spring of 2013—Becker’s programs certainly seem to focus on more esoteric fare by the likes of Nadia Boulanger, Nicholas Maw, Irving Fine, Arnold Mendelssohn (a distant relative of Felix), and J. S. Bach’s disparate progeny. Becker explained further why this was so.

“The issue of our *niche* comes by way of my own experiences as a choral singer. My mentor, Robert Shafer, a well-respected leader of the D.C. choral community, was my high school choral director and the *first* concert I *ever* sang as a 16-year old was under the direction of Aaron Copland at the Kennedy Center. As you can imagine, I was hooked after that, although I had always been an instrumentalist and remained active in the band and orchestra throughout college. I was very fortunate to experience Shafer’s strong resolve in performing works of living composers, as well as the ‘warhorses.’ The District of Columbia is a very choral-heavy environment. What wasn’t needed was another choir to do standard repertoire. Besides, since I started performing the great choral works at a relatively young age, I became interested in what else was out there and in making new works happen through commissioning.”

The Cantate Chamber Singers has fulfilled this mission to support living composers in part by sponsoring a biennial contest for composers aged 35 and under. Candidates submit a new work for mixed chorus based on a theme chosen by Becker. Winners receive a \$1,000 award, and winning entries are considered for performance in a Cantate concert. The winner of the 2011 Young Composer Contest, Joshua Rand Hummel, is listed on the website at the time of this writing. A master’s graduate in composition from the Hartt School of the University of Hartford, he had his work premiered at a Cantate concert in March of 2012.

“I recall the moment the idea of a Young Composer Contest popped into my head. It was perhaps in my third year, in the middle of a board meeting. They fully supported the idea immediately and, thanks to the wonderful volunteerism that has always been present with Cantate, implemented it starting that very year. The next Young Composer Contest has officially been announced. As part of our celebration of Benjamin Britten’s centenary, we have chosen a charming text he wrote to be included in the album cover of the first recording of *Simple Symphony*. The YCC announcements are being sent across the country, and we have had winners from all over. The deadline for submission is July 1, 2013, so interested composers reading this should check our website at cantate.org for more information and for the text to be set.”

Another way that Cantate Chamber Singers encourages the writing of new compositions is through their Composer-in-Residence program. While such programs are fairly common in larger arts organizations, and in the university environment, it is unusual for a smaller independent ensemble. I asked if this innovation had met with similar enthusiasm from her board.

“Yes. The same phenomenon occurred a few years later when I broached the concept of a Composer-in-Residence program. It was to be a two-year cycle with two compositions required of the recipient: one short work suitable for a middle school chorus, as we were collaborating with a Montgomery County public school at the time, and a large 45-minute work for Cantate to premiere. We have been fortunate enough to have extremely gifted composers in the Cantate ‘family.’ The program is not intentionally local, although it is obviously easier and more cost-effective to have the composer close enough to come to more than just the dress rehearsal. A lot comes back to trying to do *big* things on our incredibly small budget.

“One result of the program was Maurice Saylor’s witty *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits* on the text of Lewis Carroll. I recall the first lunch I had with Maurice about this project.



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He and I had been undergraduates together at The Catholic University of America some years before. One of the first things Maurice shared was that he *didn't* want to write another Requiem; it was just so *gloomy*, he whined. He then proceeded to tell me he 'had a notion'—*notion* is a term we have come to both fear and admire in Maurice—to set this text. He then delivered the most entertaining recitation of the extended poem from memory, complete with character voices and eerie sounds when the Boojum was mentioned."

Having lately reviewed *The Hunting of the Snark* I had a pretty good idea what Becker meant about the fear and admiration associated with Saylor's "notions," but I had to ask what specifically she had in mind.

"Maurice is an extremely curious and interesting fellow, and his saying 'notion' would generally tell us he was thinking of something out of the box. For instance, the second Saylor commission was Concerto for Cello and Choir. We had the stage set up as an orchestra, but the singers took those seats in pairs around music stands, just like a string section, and the soloist, cellist Nancy Snider, was front and center. This was actually paired with the reprise of *The Hunting of the Snark* the weekend we recorded it, so it was an all-Saylor program."

A concerto for cello and chorus...I had to digress for a moment to ask how that turned out.

"The concerto was very challenging, as the pitch reference only came through the solo cello. The rest of the 'orchestra' was chorus *a cappella*. Our singers are always up for something new and different though; they wouldn't sing with me if they only wanted to do the standard repertoire!"

So, how did the chorus respond to Saylor's delightful but decidedly non-standard repertoire work?

"Maurice brought some of the score to our first of that cycle of rehearsals some 18 months later. Over the course of the next few months he attended every rehearsal and adjusted, rewrote, and explained to us in great detail all the wonderful effects and idiosyncrasies of the piece as we were learning it. What we ended up with was truly a finely tailored work, which emphasized the strengths

of our organization. *Snark* was love at near-first sight. Maurice was wonderful and having him explain the thought process behind the composition made us *all* feel smarter. Some of the special sound effects Maurice wanted were a little tricky to grasp and required some negotiation, but Maurice was always clever in coming up with alternatives.”

And how did the recording sessions go?

“We were so thrilled when an offer to record *Snark* with Naxos gave us the opportunity to revisit this clever and well-crafted work, or what Saylor calls his ‘magnum opus.’ Recording both *Crown* and *Snark* were fairly painless because our first sessions were the night of the live concert, so folks were *uber*-prepared. In both instances, we involved children’s choir and had to be conscious of getting their music done and getting them home at a decent hour since it was during the school year. One fun memory of *Snark* was the ‘scream auditions’ for Fit Five. *The Hunting of the Snark* has this charming movement complete with high-pitched screaming performed by the middle school chorus of The Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, Maryland. (Ann Vaughn is their director.) Some of the young girls clearly had practiced. The result, I think, is pretty terrifying and convincing.”

It is indeed: very Nibelungen-like. Our conversation then turned to composer Andrew Earle Simpson, who I already knew as a member of the Snark Pit-band. In addition, he is, along with Maurice Saylor, one of the composers’ group that produces new silent movie scores under the collective name The Snark Ensemble. I assumed there was a connection between those activities and the commission to write *A Crown of Stars*.

“Saylor recommended his colleague at Catholic University, Andrew Simpson, as a potential next composer-in-residence, and what a godsend Andrew has been to us. My first encounter with Simpson was when Maurice asked him to learn to play the accordion so he could play on the *Snark* premiere. Andrew, always up for a challenge and gifted beyond belief, took him up on it and has since gotten other gigs as an accordion player. After our initial contact and contract with him for a residency, he became Cantate’s Keyboard Artist, accompanying rehearsals, occasionally singing with the choir and guest conducting on some Cantate concerts. Andrew wanted to compose a wedding oratorio and, along with his brilliant wife, classicist Sarah Ferrario, compiled texts from numerous sources, including some in ancient Greek, which Ferrario masterfully translated. The result is *A Crown of Stars*, the most recent Cantate CD, released earlier this summer on Albany Records. Set for chorus, treble choir, soprano and tenor soloists, and chamber ensemble, the multimovement work is truly a celebration of love and commitment. It was first presented in a concert called *Two Weddings and a Funeral* in which we performed Benjamin Britten’s *Wedding Anthem*, the Howells Requiem, and the premiere of *Crown*. The Maryland State Boychoir, under the direction of Stephen Holmes, collaborated with us on this project, as one of the requirements of our commissions is that they include a children’s chorus of some kind.”

It is sometimes tricky getting record labels, even ones as adventurous as Naxos and Albany, to take a chance on new works. Cantate had managed two in a row. I asked how the Albany recording was arranged and how they found soloists for the challenging work.

“Andrew has a relationship with Albany and it was he who approached them about the project of *Crown*. We were very happy that they were willing to gamble on a new piece, but they clearly have the highest respect for Andrew and the other discs of his works they have created.

“Our soprano soloist Lisa Edwards-Burrs was a colleague of Andrew’s at Catholic University. I had not met or heard her, but trusted that Andrew knew the sound he wanted for his piece. Joseph Dietrich, the tenor, was one of my students at George Washington. I have since hired him frequently, in particular for music of Benjamin Britten. He completed his master’s degree at Mannes, lives in New York, and works at the Metropolitan Opera.”

The discmate on that Albany CD is by the one composer of the three not part of the Cantate circle, Russian composer Alfred Schnittke. His Requiem is fairly well known in Russia and has also been taken up by some northern European choruses. It is not, however, at all well known in the U.S. I was curious how it came to be included and if it was a work to which she thought Cantate brought something different than those ensembles.

“One of my students from George Washington University introduced me to the Schnittke and

I loved the quirkiness of it—with that electric guitar, and all—and the fact that the movements were so short and polystylistic. The latter is his trademark, of course. I first performed it in a concert some years ago with one of my favorite titles: *Bach and the USSR*. The repertoire was Bach—*Komm Jesu Komm* (BWV 229), *Amore traditore* (BWV 203) a baritone solo cantata in Italian, and the *Quodlibet* (BWV 524), and in the second half was the Schnittke. I don't know that we bring anything unique to the piece because the piece itself does that. We hope that the musicality and quality will make it a contender against the few other recordings there are."

Schnittke's Requiem, written in memory of his mother who died in 1972, was conceived as part of his incidental music for a production of Schiller's *Don Carlos* at the Moscow Mossovet Theatre in 1975. In the Soviet Union at that time sacred music was censored, so this commission provided Schnittke the opportunity to write a full requiem and to actually hear it performed. It is scored for the unusual combination of trumpet, trombone, organ, piano, celesta, electric guitar, electric bass, timpani, and an array of percussion, including flexatone, bass drum, gong, chimes, bells, vibraphone, marimba, and drums. I wondered what it was like recording the Schnittke with all the unusual demands it makes.

"Recording the Schnittke was quite a bit trickier because we had not performed it for years. The setup in the church was constantly being rearranged. The organ, a small tracker in the front choir loft, was difficult to balance with the other parts, and the trumpet and trombone ended up being placed about halfway down the center aisle; I'm sure they felt the distance. Everyone was terrific considering the complexity and difficulty of the piece, and I am quite pleased with the end result."

Early in our conversation, I had been searching for a theme on which to build this feature. I had tried to encourage Gisèle Becker to talk about her solo and conducting career in early music (her work with the Washington Bach Consort merits a listing on the Bach Cantatas website), about the experience of preparing choruses for other conductors (including Robert Shaw, Paul McCreech, Harry Christophers, and Nicholas McGeegan), about the differences between U.S. and English choruses ("That's a *whole* other article, albeit an interesting one") and funding for arts organizations, especially smaller ones ("No, too depressing..."). She made it very clear that she only wanted to discuss Cantate and the talented people with whom she worked. Only as we were nearing the end of our conversation did I realize that the theme had been there all along. Here was an artist who was all about collaboration: with her singers, with her composers, with her board, and with other arts organizations in the Washington, D.C., area.

The epiphany came as we were talking again about commissions: "We are excited about our next commission that has just been contracted. While we're still in the early stages of discussion, it will likely be a work about the Civil Rights Movement, including possible participation of an *cappella* chorus, a gospel group, and a narrator. Professor Judah Adashi, from Baltimore's Peabody School of Music and one of the past winners of Cantate's Young Composer Contest, was chosen to write it. The completed work will be premiered in the spring of 2015 as part of our 30th anniversary celebration."

I commented on how often her concerts seemed to include other groups. Was this part of a marketing strategy, or to appeal to a wider audience?

"The inclusion of other groups is a part of every small group's mission, I would imagine. Not only is it good for getting butts in seats, but grants almost require it for any kind of funding. Plus it is just the right thing to do. I completely endorse collaborating. It makes sense marketing-wise, administratively, and hopefully artistically."

Becker's innovative programing and her quest for new partnerships have led to opportunities to work in artistic fields in which choruses seldom participate. She had earlier mentioned the Concerto for Cello and Chorus. She went on to describe other collaborative projects.

"A recent triumph was our June 9, 2012, live performance of a newly commissioned score—also by Andrew Simpson—to the 1928 silent film *The Wind*, starring Lillian Gish. The silent film project was *very* cool and one of the most challenging things I have ever done. (Although we all think we have perfect tempo memory—ha!—every time it was different.) We were fortunate to partner with the AFI Theater and Cultural Center and managed to sell out the 400-seat hall. We are repeating *The Wind* next May 4th for the Library of Congress at their Mt. Pony Theater and, yes,

hoping this will lead to more projects with film.”

“We have also worked with dancers fairly often. After a successful collaboration on Menotti’s *The Unicorn, the Gorgon and The Manticore*, we commissioned choreography for Stravinsky’s *Mass*, which we performed at the Kennedy Center Terrace Theater as part of our 25th anniversary season. Our next choreography commission will be for our performance of Benjamin Britten’s *Curlw River* in the 2013–2014 season celebrating the Britten centenary. It will be fully staged using Japanese Noh conventions, as originally envisioned by the composer.”

It was now pretty easy to see where Gisèle Becker’s heart is: partners, collaborators, trusted friends, and the Cantate family. In fact, her last word was on the collaborations, which made it onto these two CDs.

“It is such a thrill to be able to return to a work after so much hard preparation and, in bringing Saylor and Simpson’s works to CD, a huge sense of pride is felt by all of us. These works might not exist without us. What a loss it would be if we stopped assisting in the creation of new works of art. And if a small group like Cantate Chamber Singers is able to prioritize these projects on a tiny budget, anyone should be able to. It’s scary, it’s unpredictable, but it is our responsibility, and it is the legacy we leave for future audiences and musicians.

SAYLOR *The Hunting of the Snark*.¹ *Publicity Pays*.² CARLUZZO *Stolen Goods*.² A. SIMPSON *Too Many Mammals*.² • Cantate C Singers; ¹Holton-Arms Lower School Ch; ¹Snark Pit-Band; ²Snark Ens • NAXOS 8.572685 (73:59)

Mention of contemporary musical treatments of Lewis Carroll’s writings immediately brings to mind David Del Tredici’s obsessive and mostly nostalgic Alice-inspired compositions. However, as much as I have enjoyed those, I must say that Maurice Saylor, a composer previously unknown to me, has trumped Del Tredici in sheer imaginative matching of nonsense music to nonsense words. Both Carroll’s epic silliness, *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits*, and Saylor’s setting of large portions of it for *Snarkestra*, chorus, and children’s choir are cleverly crafted works of their genre, which simply lack the usual courtesy of making sense. That of course is the genius of the verse and the reason that this setting is so much fun.

Maurice Saylor is a Washington, D.C.,-based composer and performer, though by day he is a mild-mannered music librarian at The Catholic University of America. He has been the composer-in-residence for the Cantate Chamber Singers on two occasions, and it was for them that he wrote *The Hunting of the Snark* in 2004. The original idea was to write for the chorus and chamber orchestra, but, as he explains in his notes, “It struck me that a traditional orchestra would be too straight-laced for Jubjubs and Boojums.” Del Tredici came to the same conclusion with Alice, augmenting conventional ensembles with saxophones, banjos, and accordions. Saylor goes one better and writes for a “pit-band” made up only of “instruments reviled by society at large and rejected by people of good taste and common sense.” These include the same exotic instruments Del Tredici uses as supplements, plus bass versions of the accordion and saxophone, almost every other woodwind, harmonica, amplified violin, a battery of tuned percussion, and a washtub. The result is a truly amazing array of colors; an ensemble that is eccentric, sometime hilariously perverse, and deliciously supportive of Carroll’s witty text.

Thousands of words of learned prose have been published speculating on what that text means, however much Carroll maintained that he had no allegorical intent. The rather academic controversy will not be resolved here, but in nonsense or parody (conscious or otherwise) there is meaning and beauty of expression to be found. Of course, one has to understand the words to appreciate this, and while the diction of the chorus is generally excellent, the backward placement of the singers and the intensity of the accompaniment—not to mention the strangeness of some of the language—make the verse hard to follow. Unfortunately, there is no text supplied, neither in the booklet nor on Naxos’s website. There are, of course, free-access copies online, but following one of those reveals the other problem: the text is heavily cut. In fact Saylor used only 64 of the poem’s 142 verses. No doubt 46 minutes seemed long enough, but lost are many of Carroll’s likely allegories: the Bellman’s blank map and the journey, the elaborate and absurd preparations to do battle with the Snark, the sec-

ond threefold repetition of a statement as evidence (an oblique Biblical reference?) and the Butcher's nonsensical proof, the Barrister's dream parody of a trial, and the Bandersnatch's attack on the Banker. Saylor tells the core story admirably—it is still a huge amount of text he has set—but something of the point of the poem is arguably lost.

(For those who care to edit their own text sheet, the verses cut are: Fit One: 12, 18, and 19; Fit Two: 2–8, 10–14; Fit Four: 2–6, 9–18 (leaving only four verses intact); Fit Five: most of 8, 9–26, and 29; and Fit Eight: 4. Fits Six and Seven are not set at all, but are represented by short “Snarkestral Outbursts.”)

The performance itself is spirited and undoubtedly a labor of love for all involved. The 13 instrumentalists are superb, and play their taxing parts on multiple instruments with skill and enthusiasm. The choral part sounds comparatively unassuming on first impression; tonal, largely homophonic, nominally four-part with occasional forays into as many as seven, but with a fair amount of the choral narrative itself in unison for textual clarity, sometimes against wordless rhythmic patterns, or with phrases in simple canon. The apparent simplicity is deceptive, however, and with further acquaintance the rhythmic complexity of the vocal writing, with its challenging intervals and occasionally tricky counterpoint, becomes apparent. And then there are the sound effects—ululations, screams, rhythmic laughter and humming, jungle sounds, flutters on pitch, and “unintelligible moaning”—that choruses are seldom asked to make. The choral forces—there is a treble chorus, as well, in the Fifth Fit—acquit themselves admirably under the energetic direction of Cantate Chamber Singers Artistic Director Gisèle Becker. They are, however, so stretched by certain of the music's demands that ensemble and intonation are impaired. This should be a small matter, though, for the brilliance and whimsy of what Saylor describes as his “magnum opus” emerge undiminished.

The disc is completed with a sampling of another of Saylor's extracurricular activities. After the experience with his Snark Pit-Band, Saylor formed a trio of composer/performers who write and play new scores for silent film comedies. One score each for a threesome of mid-1920s Charley Chase short subjects is included. The one by Saylor—a reed player in the ensemble—bears more than a passing semblance to his Snark music, while the other two by Andrew Earle Simpson (keyboards) and Phil Carluzzo (percussion and frets) are clever and engaging renovations of period-style jazz. The ensemble, here a sextet, brings the program to a rousing conclusion. Not to be missed.

Ronald E. Grames

A. E. SIMPSON *A Crown of Stars: Wedding Cantata in Three Parts*. **SCHNITKE** *Requiem* • Gisèle Becker, cond; Lisa Edwards-Burrs (sop); Joseph Dietrich (ten); Cantate Chamber Singers; Maryland State Boychoir; Various Instrumentalists • ALBANY 1358 (73:53 □)

Admittedly, my sense of humor has always leaned to the far side, but surely even those with the most vestigial of funny bones would have to acknowledge the incongruity of pairing a wedding oratorio with a requiem.

For readers unfamiliar with Andrew Earle Simpson, he is a composer, pianist, and organist, and is Ordinary Professor and head of the division of Theory and Composition at the Benjamin T. Rome School of Music at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. In his role as composer, he has worked in opera, film, orchestral, chamber, choral, dance, and vocal music, and his most recent projects reflect an interest in cross-disciplinary music, silent film, and theatrical music. A good deal more information may be found at his website, andrewsimpson.com.

This is the world premiere recording of Simpson's *A Crown of Stars*, a wedding oratorio celebrating the universality of human love. It was commissioned by the Cantate Chamber Singers while Simpson was the ensemble's composer-in-residence. The libretto draws on a wide variety of poetic texts from sources ancient to modern. In the case of the very opening number, “At the Carnival,” not only the words but the music are by 19th-century Victorian music hall songster, George Leybourne, whose ennobling ditty includes the line, “May cows lay eggs and fish grows legs, if I ever cease to love.” In contrast, Simpson also takes verses from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Blake, Solomon's *Song of Songs*, Sappho, the *Rig Veda*, blessings from Jewish and Anglican marriage ceremonies, and various Roman poets.