

## GARFEIN: Mortality Mansions

Slattery; Breckenridge; Dover, piano. English texts. Delos DE3548



**H**ERSCHEL GARFEIN (b. 1958) is best known as a librettist (Elmer Gantry, Sister Carrie), but he studied music at Yale and the New England Conservatory and teaches composition at the NYU Steinhardt School. For this song cycle, Garfein handpicked eleven poems from the large output of Donald Hall, the 2006 poet laureate who died in June at eighty-nine, creating—as Hall puts it in the notes—a cycle that has “a wholeness I could never have anticipated or predicted.”

Garfein demonstrates considerable versatility, imagination and subtlety in putting across Hall’s words. In the opening song, “When the Young Husband,” a man picks up “his friend’s pretty wife” in a taxi, clearly headed for an adulterous tryst. Garfein’s music is at first insouciantly bouncy. Soon, the man hears “a prophetic voice” in his mind that sprojects the minute details of both the intended encounter and the inevitably disastrous aftermath. Encroaching dissonance culminates with “the daily agony of the requirement to survive,” and some crashing, ominous chords. After this, the jolting return of the opening cheerfulness lands meaningfully, as we realize how easily life can veer permanently off course. The number stands as possibly the best argument against infidelity in the contemporary American art-song repertoire.

Most of the remaining songs offer an aging person’s perspective on love, lust, memory and dying—specifically, the untimely death of Hall’s wife, Jane, in 1995, at the age of forty-eight. “When I Was Young” declares that “At sixty the body’s one desire sustains my pulse, not to mention my groin, as much as it ever did.” Garfein keeps the vocal line simple and forthright, communicating the text naturally while allowing the piano part to provide harmonic freshness. Tenor Michael Slattery is a felicitous choice to perform these songs; his smooth, flexible, appealingly direct voice is a perfect match for the immediacy of expression that is a hallmark of both composer and poet.

Garfein draws on popular idioms when it suits his purposes, as in “Woolworth’s,” which begins jocularly with a light samba rhythm, and later features a marchlike anthem that is a perfectly early Americana-style setting of the phrase “I will sail to Massachusetts.” The fresh and flashy “Fête,” in which “Festival lights go on in villages throughout the province,” ends unexpectedly with “when you touch me, there,” providing a nifty twist and redefining the song retroactively. The middle of the cycle bogs down with three consecutive slow numbers, but the last of these, “Dying is Simple, She Said,” has a powerful impact as Garfein lingers meaningfully on each adjective in the phrase “her beautiful enormous round brown eyes.” Slattery, accordingly, floats the passage beautifully.

The especially distinctive “Deathwork,” which follows immediately, is skittering and restless but captures the glum and sometimes maddening monotony of a new, unwanted routine. In “Freezes and Junes,” the gradually deepening levels of sadness experienced by the poet in the garden his wife once tended are mitigated by the radiant blooming of poppies. The concluding “Gold” has a serene, valedictory feel, as Garfein creates a glowing cushion for the bittersweet reminiscence.

After the cycle concludes, we hear each poem again, read by Hall with his gravelly New England intonations. His readings are quietly underscored, with the piano parts altered and/or truncated to match his pacing. Possibly these have been included to fill out the disc’s playing time, but it’s interesting to hear the texts in the poet’s own voice.

The last track is Garfein’s setting of “Otherwise,” a poem by Hall’s late wife, Jane Kenyon, an accomplished poet in her own right. The poems of Mortality Mansions are largely about Kenyon anyway, and there’s something magical about hearing her resurrected via her own words in this final song. Soprano Marnie Breckenridge gives lovely voice to this dreamy meditation.

The skilled and expressive pianist Dimitri Dover is also an essential part of this recording’s success.

—Joshua Rosenblum

