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ELLINGTON (arr. Dehlinger) Come Sunday;1 Imagine my frustration;1 Don't get around much anymore;1 Sophisticated Lady;1 Meditation; Almighty God has those Angels.1 ELLINGTON (arr. Ham) In a Sentimental Mood;1 Do nothin' till you hear from me;1 Prelude to a Kiss.1 ELLINGTON (arr. Levine) I'm beginning to see the light;1 Solitude.1 ELLINGTON (arr. Mills) Heaven1 • 1Danielle Talamantes (sop); Henry Dehlinger (pn) • MS1617

Danelle Talamantes's debut recording, *Canciones españolas*, was positively reviewed by my colleague Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold in *Fanfare* 38:6. There, Talamantes's voice was described as "velvety and dark-hued." Quite rightly, too, as Talamantes's voice is perfect for Ellington's miniature masterpieces. It's good to see Ellington getting the recognition he deserves. Readers on the other side of the Atlantic from him, or ones who vacationed in the United Kingdom during the summer, perhaps caught some Ellington in the Prom concert entitled "Ella and Dizzy: A Centenary Tribute"; Harlem and Caravan both appeared.

The present album features arrangements by four musicians: the pianist Henry Dehlinger (pianist on this album), Larry Ham, Caren Levine, and Marvin Mills. To group them as concisely as possible, the listing in the title does not reflect the playing order of songs.

First up, though, is in fact *Come Sunday*—an Ellington favorite, clearly, as the song crops up in Ellington's symphony, *Black, Brown and Beige*. The recording by gospel singer Mahalia Jackson is itself a classic, her voice likewise smoky in the hence rather confusingly titled 1958 album *Black, Brown and Beige*. The booklet notes by Scott Parish on this MSR release are full of superlatives, as one might perhaps expect, but for once they are absolutely justified. Dehlinger's arrangement is superbly judged, from the lyricism through to the stride. Once could easily miss Talamantes's textbook but never his studied diction.

Inspired by the beginning of "a little rock-and-roll tune" by band leader Gerald Wilson, Ellington along with Billy Strayhorn produced what Scott Parrish's notes memorably refer to as a "wallflower's lament." Interestingly, Dehlinger's arrangement of this late work mixes in references to Ellington's *Black Beauty* (1929) and *C-Jam Blues* (1942), in effect uniting various decades of Ellington's creative output. Talamantes's swooping soprano tells the story of the wait for an invitation to dance. As her line gets ever more impassioned, the piano becomes ever more active; the final gestures include a free-floating melisma from Talamantes. The arrangement is a world away from Ella Fitzgerald's bold-as-brass account with Ellington himself and his orchestra on the 1965 album *Ella at Duke's Palace* (no preternaturally high screaming trumpet on MSR, even in piano imitation). The arrangements on this disc are terrifically imaginative, wide-ranging but absolutely in the spirit of Ellington.

The three arrangements by Larry Ham begin with the jazz standard *In a Sentimental Mood*. Apparently improvised in North Carolina one evening in 1935. Readers may recognize Ham's name from Renée Fleming's 1999 Decca album *Prelude to a Kiss*, where this arrangement was first recorded. The higher reaches of Talamantes's soprano voice at a medium dynamic level add real emotional punch to the work's close. Whatever the undeniable beauty of her voice, Fleming's diction is just that bit too studied, and she does sound like an opera singer singing Ellington (which, after all, is what she is); Talamantes is more spontaneous sounding, and sounds more on home turf. And despite Fleming's excellent sense of pitch, Talamantes's is still more developed and, frankly, offers a greater source of joy.

The light touch of Dehlinger's arrangement of *Don't get around much anymore* is delightful; Dehlinger the pianist reveals his virtuoso side here. The move from big band hit to solo vocal/piano intimacy is a large one, but possibly not as large as the gap between those and the version by the Ink Spots (interestingly, this song held the No. 1 spot in the R&B charts in 1943 in both the Ellington and the Ink Spots' versions).

The whispered confession of *Sophisticated Lady* in this performance is most touching. There is an easy to Talamantes's way with the vocal line that melds perfectly with Dehlinger's quasi-improvised accompaniment. The pepped-up arrangement of *I'm beginning to see the light* is by Caren Levine. The piano is gifted with what amounts to a cadenza, mirrored at the end by a passage of open vocal freedom. There is huge competition here, of course, in the form of *Ella* and Ellington (not to mention the even more upbeat Louis Armstrong); yet Talamantes has a voice all of her own. The 1934 ballad *Solitude* is heard in a Levine arrangement specifically targeted at the Talamantes/Dehlinger duo. There is the impression that time stops here.



The solo piano Meditation in Dehlinger's own arrangement expands the envelope of the original to a more intense experience than Ellington himself provided before we meet the only arrangement on the album by Marvin Mills, again written specifically for Talamantes and Dehlinger: Heaven. This is one of the lesser-recorded Ellington pieces, because for its awkward intervals (softened in effect here, perhaps, in comparison with the performance by Ellington's own octet). Mills also, inventively, replaces the original bossa nova beat later in the song with swing. Finally (and pardon the pun) an almighty outburst opens Almighty God has those Angels like a piano reduction from a film score, before the voice slowly unfolds the melody over a more rapid piano contribution. Talamantes's voice later swoops like a bird in its higher regions.

It's a nice idea to top and tail the recital with pieces from Ellington's Sacred Concerts; one has to acknowledge, too, the excellence of Alice Babs in the original of Almighty God. But this is a simply superb album, stunningly recorded, that deserves every success.

Colin Clarke

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