

Music Review

One Thousand Beams of Song

One Thousand Beams of Light

Songs on Buddhist Themes by Bodhivajra (Peter Hayes)

CD available from peterhayesmusic.com £11.50 inc. P&P

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'ONE THOUSAND BEAMS OF LIGHT' is a collection of recordings of songs on Buddhist themes by Bodhivajra (Peter Hayes). They are performed by Jayne May-Sysum – Soprano, John Mudd – Cello and Bodhivajra himself on piano and synthesizer. The title of the CD is taken from the opening verse of text, a setting of words by the seventh Dalai Lama. Jayne May-Sysum has a beautiful voice and a sensitive understanding of these words. She has a fine vocal range and variety of tone colour which, combined with perfect diction and intonation, serve both words and music admirably. This is matched by John Mudd's masterly 'cello playing on the first track. Bodhivajra's accompaniment is, throughout, sensitive and colourful, and we can be certain that he does what the composer intended! The collection is of settings by writers as diverse as Ryokan, Siegfried Sassoon, the Seventh Dalai Lama and Urgyen Sangharakshita, poet and founder of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community, as well as texts by Ajita, Jaan Kaplinski and the composer.

Poets don't always welcome musical settings of their work. When making a setting of any text there could be a temptation to become absorbed in one's own musical ideas and lose sight of the spirit of the poetry or prose one is setting. The English composer Herbert Howells once found himself sitting next to the poet A.E.Housman at a dinner at Trinity College Cambridge, and was told in no uncertain terms never to set any of his poetry to music; he was about to tell Housman that he had just done so! The words Bodhivajra has set here are on Buddhist themes, and having been a Dharma practitioner for most of his life it is not surprising to find that, unlike the composers Housman feared, he is completely in sympathy with these texts.

In the first song, for instance, the words are a description by the Seventh Dalai Lama of expanded states of consciousness, images of vastness and freedom, of love and liberated energy. From the outset the music announces open expansiveness with big rising intervals. This feeling of openness is maintained throughout the song but there is plenty of variety. At times the mood is contemplative and at others animated with highly charged rhythmic energy, particularly when we hear of 'An image of gray wind flowing forcefully through the sky'.

The second song 'Bobbing on the Waves' is a setting of words by the Zen poet Ryokan. We hear of Ryokan's childlike delight at the arrival of warm weather and a spring outing amongst the green of the forest, the burbling of the streams and the bird song. The freshness of the scene described by Ryokan and his exuberant exultation is wonderfully captured in the music. It swings with the swinging of his staff and burbles with the fast flowing streams. A sense of wonder, exuberance and enthusiasm is captured in the soprano's repetition of phrases at the end.

You could be forgiven for thinking you were in New Orleans at the start of the third song, another setting of a poem by Ryokan, where Bodhivajra's Jazz vocabulary is very much in evidence. This piece was first performed in an arrangement for soprano, choir, woodwind and piano at Urgyen Sangharakshita's 70th birthday celebration in 1995.

Next in the collection are five songs, settings of words in praise of the Buddhas of the Five Buddha Mandala, sometimes known as the Five Jinas. In these songs we hear something of the many and various influences on Bodhivajra as a composer; Jazz, J. S. Bach and Olivier Messiaen to mention but a few.

In the first of the 'Five Buddha' songs the tranquil and rooted aspect of Akshobya, rather than his vajric aspect, are portrayed. He is unshakeable, stable and dependable. To my ears this piece has strong baroque influence, Bach, also jazz influences. I was reminded of the French jazz pianist Jacques Loussier well known for his Bach/Jazz fusion. The set continues with four more wonderful settings. The rich golden realm of the Buddha Ratnasambhava is evoked with words by the composer – much of this song is rooted in the bass note G, emphasising Ratnasambhava's earth element. The Buddha of the western quarter Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, has more devotees in the world than any other Buddha figure and Bodhivajra captures his warm, loving, timeless qualities very well with words by poet words by Jaan Kaplinski. The fourth song is a paean of praise to Amoghasiddhi, proclaiming all his great qualities – he whose wisdom accomplishes all works, the Lord of the Midnight Sky! The complex rhythm of this piece requires accomplished musicianship and dexterity, something not lacking here, and Amoghasiddhi's 'Unimpeded progress', is a feast of rhythm and energy which has an exciting and invigorating effect.

The text of the final song of the set is a single word, the name of Vairocana, the Buddha of the central realm. He is the 'Illuminator', radiating the Dharma in every direction of space. As in the song to Amitabha this is setting for soprano and synthesiser and is marked 'warm and spacious'.

Track 9 on the CD, the song 'Fragrance of Compassion', Bodhivajra describes as 'a simple setting of a poem by my teacher Sangharakshita'. This is a profoundly heartfelt piece, the music capturing the 'Compassion in the Buddha-Heart' on seeing 'this hapless world with all its store of woes'.

The penultimate song on the 'One Thousand Beams of Light' is 'The Night is Fresh and Cool' another poem by Ryokan. This time Ryokan is taking a night-time walk. The music captures the magical atmosphere of the moonlit night.

The final song is a setting of 'Hearts Miracle' by Siegfried Sassoon the First World War poet whose poetry describes the horrors of war. This is an extraordinary poem. Surrounded by the most harrowing scenes, the unexpected arises; 'A Flower has opened in my Heart', he wonders 'What powers unknown have sown your seed'? The poet experiences a shift of consciousness a 'Heart's Miracle of Inward Light'. The music is characterized by frequent changes of time signature, contrasting tempos and shifting tonalities. The song ends quietly as it began with the words: 'I know you only as my need, And my unsealed sight', a fitting end to a fine collection of songs which reveal Bodhivajra's unique voice as a composer.