

Duo della Luna: Mangetsu

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CD Works by Botti, Bartók, Saariaho, Dusman and traditional. Texts and translations.
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DUO DELLA LUNA, the remarkable pairing of vocalist/composer Susan Botti and violinist Airi Yoshioka, evolved after Yoshioka commissioned Botti to write a work for the two of them. The success of the resulting piece, which gives its name to this collection, led to their forming a duo ensemble—and to this unusually creative recording.

Botti's inventive, six-movement *Mangetsu*, which means “full moon” in Japanese, sets three lunar-related texts, interspersed with short vocalise movements. The opening wordless song is meditative and quietly lyrical, with double-stops on the violin creating three-part harmony with Botti's solo voice. In the spare, pointillistic “From Darkness,” set to a few lines translated from *The Diary of Izumi Shikibu*, Botti

delivers flighty melismas on the opening word “From” as Yoshioka plucks, slides and tremolos. Subsequently, the vocal line spins out hesitantly but reverently, as the violin sensitively shadows Botti's excursions and subtly illuminates the text.

“The Stolen Child,” with text excerpted from the Yeats poem of the same name, has an aggressive beginning with dissonant arpeggios in the violin. Later, an ostinato pizzicato accompaniment leads into a subtly bluesy section that describes a couple's nighttime romp on the beach. As the text gets more abstract, the melodic line becomes more angular and Botti's delivery breathier, showing a wide range of dramatic expression. The ending movement, another vocalise, is reflective again, soaring briefly, and fading beautifully.

The next set is fascinating: Botti has taken five of the Bartók *44 Duos for 2 Violins* and arranged them for voice and violin. For three, this involved going back to the original folk-song source material and restoring the words; for the other two, she uses wordless texts. At times Botti's vocals sound like a mad incantation, almost frightening in her upper range. Especially in the wordless movements, her characterful, sometimes guttural, sometimes yelping syllabifications give the pieces a level of musical drama that takes them to a realm far beyond the original versions.

Kaija Saariaho's profound, transfixing *Changing Light*, to a text by Rabbi Jules Harlow, explores the fragility of humankind and reveals Saariaho's customary vivid imagination even as it hews close to D minor. Botti shows impressive control in her *sotto voce* delivery, all the way up to a delicate high B.

The other major work is Linda Dusman's *Triptych of Gossips*, with a text by Serena Hilsinger. When Hilsinger calls it a triptych, she's not kidding: her poem conjures trios of women from mythology and literature ("Euryale, Medusa, Stenno"; "Ligeia, Leukosia, Parthenope") in three movements, each of which consists of three-line stanzas with three syllables per line.

Both Botti and Yoshioka are cheerfully unhesitant about making ugly sounds when called for—Botti sliding, growling and hissing (occasionally sounding actually possessed), and Yoshioka grinding her bow uncomfortably close to the bridge. At times the piece sounds like a catalogue of extended techniques for both voice and violin, but Dusman has a compelling vision for Hilsinger's boldly imaginative incantations, and the two warrior-like performers embrace it eagerly. At thirteen minutes, the piece is not always easy listening (nor, surely, is it intended as such), but it's unfailingly imaginative and great fun as performance art.

Botti fills out the collection with her arrangements of "Wayfaring Stranger" (a bluesy rendition with improvised-sounding violin ornamentation and an intriguing non-cadence at the end) and two folk songs from Northern Italy that Botti dedicates to her grandparents. In these readily enjoyable pieces, as throughout the recording, the two opulently creative performers consistently bring out the best in each other. —*Joshua Rosenblum*