

SOUND ADVICE: Singing the songs of Finn

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LISA HOWARD
SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE
THE MUSIC OF WILLIAM FINN
Ghostlight Records

What we have here is a thoroughly successful and extremely impressive album, Lisa Howard's debut solo CD. She's taking on the songs of William Finn (a natural fit, as she was a stand-out in the original cast of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*), who doesn't toss off light and lightweight songs, but rather presents challenging ones with naked emotions and passions throbbing or a polished blizzard of lyrics. Without signs of vocal strain or breaking a sweat, but embracing the intensity, Howard triumphs time and again, sounding thoroughly involved, and she aces the musical demands. In the "bigger" pieces, like "Infinite Joy" that are like the musical equivalents of Olympic events, she's like the athlete who you know will go for—and get—the gold. And she sails through "Sailing" with real beauty and ease, freshening this number that has been tackled by many singers, and making the song thoughtful and pretty.

Michael Starobin, with Finn projects also on his résumé, superbly and interestingly orchestrated six of the 11 tracks. And we have the formidable presence of musical director/CD producer/pianist Vadim Feichtner conducting the orchestra; he's an alumnus of *Spelling Bee* and other Finn projects, who clearly "gets it" and gets it right. There's nothing from that musical here, but several other musicals are represented. Notably, *The Royal Family of Broadway*, a 1994 score without its own full-score recording, is royally treated by having four of its numbers presented, including the CD's delicious showbiz saga opener, "Listen to the Beat." Finn's *Falsettos* forays are sampled twice, both in song pairings with something from another theatrical source: "Trina's Song" is coupled with "I Have Found" from *Royal Family* and the tender "Father to Son" is matched up (not mashed up with—it blends well) with "That's Enough for Me" from *Romance in Hard Times* (that score's "Hold My Baby Back" gets its own airing).

Two male vocalists make appearances: Sebastian Arcelus joins in on the CD's title song and Derrick Baskin basks in the glow of love with another *Royal* command performance, "I Don't Know Why I Love You" (known also as "I Don't Know Why You Love Me"—shades of *Show Boat's* ardent contentment, but with more guts). Back-up singers join the party a bit, too. Special mention must be made of "How to Make Chocolate Pudding," the long, quirky, quick-paced story-song of a zillion words, and Lisa Howard is just the woman to tackle it. The cavalcade of words were set not by our fine friend Finn, but by Deborah Abramson.

The CD is a satisfying mix of styles, moods and tempi, throbbingly sincere readings accompanying rich melody lines, and some leaner renditions. Singers often make the mistake of *over*-singing Finn songs because their statements can be so bold and devotionally declarative. Lisa Howard trusts the material—when the song's colors are intense, you don't need to add neon of your own; when a song's heart is pounding overtime on its own is not the time to bring out the defibrillator. Her voice is more than just a gloriously attractive instrument at her disposal: she infuses believable character and personality, shades words nicely, and projects a been there/done that/survived it sensibility. When humor is called for, and it often is, it's woven into the characterization and phrasing naturally—rather than used as a tool to hit one over the head.

Lisa Howard has the tools of her singing trade sharpened and uses them with ultimate skill and infinite joy. And it's a joy to state unequivocally that this is one of the finest vocal CDs to come down the pike in some time.