



ON THE RECORD: Lisa Howard and William Finn's "Songs of Innocence & Experience"

By *Steven Suskin*
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"Songs of Innocence & Experience: The Music of William Finn" [Ghostlight 8-3332]

Lisa Howard, an original cast member of William Finn's *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, has wisely chosen Finn's songbook for her first solo album. "Songs of Innocence & Experience," it's called, being filled with — well, songs of innocence and experience. A dozen songs by Finn; some previously unheard, all well sung, many dressed in orchestral sounds to which Finn-listeners are unaccustomed.

Working with musical director (and recording producer) Vadim Feichtner, Howard has assembled an interesting collection, for the most part excluding songs you might expect. Or songs *I* might expect; of my 20 favorite Finn songs, only two are present. Finn, in fact, says in his liner note, "though I might have chosen differently, this much is true: anything Lisa sings is perfection." And I agree.

Howard gives us songs which are, for the most part, rarely heard. There are four selections — count 'em, four — from the unproduced *Royal Family of Broadway*: "I Have Found," "I Don't Know Why You Love Me" (a duet with Derrick Baskin), "Listen to the Beat" and "Bad Boy." Also on hand are two from the little-known *Romance in Hard Times*, with Ms. Howard doing a wonderful job on "That's Enough for Me." The title track, "Songs of Innocence & Experience" (with Sebastian Arcelus), was written for the 2005 dedication of a new performing arts center at Williams College, Finn's alma mater. A second song from that event, "How to Make Delicious Chocolate Pudding," is the only one not entirely by Finn; the music was written by Deborah Abramson, and it is the least successful selection on the CD.

This personal song assemblage might be part of what makes the CD so enjoyable. You are getting Finn, yes, but most of it sounds just slightly different than what you are used to. Take "Sailing," for example, that beautiful ballad from *A New Brain*. While most of the tracks have expanded orchestrations from up to 14 pieces — hardly Finn's distinctive "teeny tiny band" — this one is performed to a guitar solo (from Matt Hinkley). And, of course, the song is here sung by a woman. Thus we get a rather different sounding "Sailing," one that makes us listen to the song — and appreciate the song — with different ears, as it were. The beauties of Finn, though, ring true.