

FEATURE REVIEW BY HENRY FOGEL

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I strongly suspect the name Lola Williams will be as new to *Fanfare* readers as it was to me. Williams (1913–2013) was an American composer who began writing music late in life. It was only in the 1970s, after the death of her husband, that she took up composing. She seems to have focused entirely on songs, many of them settings of Shakespeare texts, some of them for multiple voices. Her songs do not deserve the complete obscurity that they have suffered. Williams was melodically inventive, and she was capable of reflecting a wide range of emotions. Her music captures the wit of Shakespeare's comedies and the passion and heartfelt emotions of the tragedies. She was also a poet herself, made her particularly sensitive to the texts she set.

Surprisingly, for a composer who was almost completely self-taught, the piano writing is more complex than simple accompaniment. This is probably true because Williams was also a pianist. Her idiom is conservative, and many of these songs could have been written in the late 19th or early 20th century. However, they are by no means harmonically simple or unadventurous. She surprises with harmonic changes at times, or with modal writing.

Everything she left behind after her death was stored in boxes and had been very rarely performed during her lifetime. Her son, Derek Williams, started going through the material and contacted a former student of his, soprano Sarah Moulton Faux. She brought along pianist/conductor Ted Taylor, and together they began to sort through the piles of manuscripts, finding different versions of the same song and figuring out which ones were the composer's final thoughts.

The music is delightful, and the more I hear it the more I appreciate it. Two adjacent tracks make clear the range displayed by Williams's compositions. *Sonnet 116* (track 9) is a warm and deeply felt setting that begins "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds...." Tenderness and passion are evident in this song. Immediately after it on track 10 is *Feste's Song* from *Twelfth Night*. "When that I was and a little tiny boy, with hey, ho, the wind and the rain, A foolish thing was but a toy, for the rain it raineth every day." Williams sets it with an appropriate swagger.

Moulton Faux's attractive lyric soprano is perfectly suited to the music, and the voice is married to an intelligent mind that understands the texts and how to project them through inflection and vocal color. Pianist Taylor is fully engaged as well; he

is an important part of the successful projection of these songs. The recording is well balanced between voice and piano, though I wish there were a bit less “air” around the singer. Very thorough and informative program notes and complete texts round out the production. For adventurous listeners who enjoy vocal music and wish to expand their horizons, this is warmly recommended.

FEATURE REVIEW BY RAYMOND TUTTLE

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The music on this CD is very nice, but knowing the story behind it is necessary to appreciate the music fully. Lola Williams was a composer whose music was almost never performed in public while she was alive, and none of it has been recorded commercially until now. Becoming a career composer was never her intention; in fact, for a long time she did not aspire to be a musician at all. (The booklet note begins thus: “In 1925, twelve-year-old Lola Marler Rogers wished she had received a bicycle instead of a baby grand piano.”) She was born in Durham, North Carolina, and studied English at Duke University, but she ended up teaching music and drama (and sometimes English) at local schools, including what today is known as the Durham Academy. She married James Wesley Williams and had three sons. Then, in the 1970s, she traveled to England on a teaching sorority scholarship to study Shakespeare. Soon, she began writing songs, many of them based on Shakespearean texts. When these were performed at all, they usually were performed at meetings of local arts organizations, and not in public. (One can almost smell the cucumber sandwiches.) It should be noted that she was an almost entirely self-taught composer, consulting only occasionally and informally with a much younger composition student who himself was a student of Robert Ward. (Williams and Ward were friends, but perhaps she was too modest to show her music to him.)

Williams died in 2013 at the age of 99. Her manuscripts patiently resided in the basement of one of her sons, who eventually showed them to Sarah Moulton Faux. She was excited by what she saw, and she enlisted the help of Ted Taylor and Amy Scurria to create the performing editions heard here. (Many of the songs exist in multiple versions, often undated, and in various stages in completion, and it was up to the “Lola Project” to figure out which versions were the definitive ones, or as close to definitive as possible.)

Considering how little guidance she received in composing them, these songs are remarkably good, if hardly forward-looking. Although most of them were

composed in the 1970s and 1980s, they could have been composed many decades earlier. They are melodic and sensitive to the texts, and if they are conservative, so what? Williams responds to Shakespeare's humor, and also to his tenderness and human dignity. Even the piano accompaniments are fine, but perhaps this should not be a great surprise, given Williams's mastery of that instrument in her childhood and young adulthood. My only criticism is that, after a while, these songs can start to sound rather "samey," so the best way to hear this CD is not all at once, but in chunks.

Apart from a few squally high notes, Faux helps these songs to put their best foot forward. On six of the 19 tracks, she is joined by one or more of the other singers listed in the headnote, but the rest of the songs are solos. Taylor is a fluid, supportive pianist who clearly relishes the often rhapsodic accompaniments, which have more to do with Romanticism than with Modernism.

I encourage young American sopranos to examine these songs and to consider whether some of them might work on their recital programs. I think they would delight audiences, and they would demonstrate how even an American woman who lived a life largely adherent to traditional gender roles could become, if not a great composer, then at least a composer who was great within the relatively narrow niche in which she operated. **Raymond Tuttle**

FEATURE REVIEW BY KEN MELTZER

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Lola Williams (1913–2013) grew up in Durham, NC, where she sang in a church choir and studied piano. In 1934, she graduated from Duke University, with a degree in English. Williams became a teacher at such institutions as Oak Grove School, Calvert Method School (now, the Durham Academy), Carr Junior School, and Durham High School. Her teaching disciplines included music, English, and directing plays. After the death in the early 1970s of her husband, Lola Williams retired from teaching to "[soak] up the Shakespearean atmosphere" in London and Stratford-upon-Avon. Williams's visits to England inspired her to write commentaries and verse, as well as to compose numerous songs for female voice, both solo and in groups. Williams was for all intents and purposes a self-taught composer. And with the exception of a few performances by local arts organizations, the songs of Lola Williams remained unheard by the public. Her compositions resided in boxes stored in the basement of the home of her youngest son Derek, a teacher at Phillips Academy in Andover, MA (a situation somewhat

reminiscent of the long-unknown work of the brilliant photographer Vivian Maier). Derek contacted one of his former students, soprano Sarah Moulton Faux, to look at the papers. As Dr. Kirsten Santos Rutschman's superb liner notes further narrate: "Ms. Faux recognized the value of the songs, and the Lola Project was born. She and conductor Ted Taylor labored over seemingly endless handwritten drafts, puzzling out the most complete versions; these were then transcribed by composer Amy Scurria, with much back-and-forth among all three to create final versions for performance." A New World Records CD, *Where Should This Music Be?*, documents the results of that project. Sarah Moulton Faux and Ted Taylor (piano) are joined by mezzo-sopranos Heather Johnson and Laura Krumm, and countertenor Nicholas Tamagna for a recording of 19 songs by Lola Williams.

The songs for the most part (though not exclusively) are based upon texts by Shakespeare, including excerpts from plays and poetry. It's clear both in her selections of lyrics, and in her composing style, that Lola Williams was a devout Anglophile. The spirit of the British folksong is never far from her writing, with an attractive reliance upon lyricism, and frequent resort to modal harmonies. Anyone familiar with the songs of composers such as Vaughan Williams, George Butterworth, and John Ireland, to name a few, will feel right at home with the *oeuvre* of Lola Williams. It's hard to imagine that Lola Williams intended her songs only for performance by local music clubs. They place considerable demands upon the musicians. The vocal writing requires singers with an impressive range, both in terms of the vertical span of notes, and dramatic expression. The piano is hardly a mere accompanist; the music is challenging, musically rich, and attuned to the song's dramatic focus. But most important, Lola Williams wrote beautiful songs. She had a gift for spinning the kinds of attractive and haunting melodies you will want to revisit. These songs would be a valuable addition to any vocal recital. And I suspect that following the release of this New World Records CD, concert audiences might be hearing them. The two principals of this recording, Sarah Moulton Faux and Ted Taylor, give marvelous performances, beautifully executed and delivered with the kind of commitment that reflects their devotion to championing this repertoire. Heather Johnson, Laura Krumm, and Nicholas Tamagna are all first-rate as well. The recorded sound is superb, with an intimate acoustic that still gives the impression of the music filling the recital hall. In addition to Dr. Rutschman's essay, the booklet includes full texts. The songs of Lola Williams certainly deserve far more exposure than they received during the composer's lifetime. Thanks to the New World Records and the artists participating on this recording, that is now possible. Most definitely recommended.

FEATURE REVIEW BY COLIN CLARKE

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Such is the freshness of invention here that it comes as something of a shock to learn that there are no entries for Lola Williams (1913–2013) in either the *Fanfare* Archive or at ArkivMusic.com. There is no direct statement of her longevity in the documentation, either. (One must work that out; as she was age 12 in 1925, she was born in 1913). Williams only devoted herself fully to composition and writing in her retirement. Much of her inspiration came from Shakespeare, mainly the comedies but also from the little-known allegorical poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” in her *Threnos (for Romeo and Juliet)*, a duet for soprano and countertenor of the utmost beauty, and of course the sonnets. In 1973 she was sent on a scholarship to Stratford-upon-Avon and London to meld with Shakespeare; further trips to the UK followed. Effectively self-taught, with just some informal lessons along the way, Williams has a clear, unsullied compositional voice rooted in tonality.

As the prime interpreter here, Sarah Moulton Faux is stunning: Her devotion to this music shines through her every syllable. Williams’s manuscripts had languished in a basement for too many years until Moulton Faux was contacted; when she saw the value of the music, the present disc was the only possible outcome.

One of the most famous snippets of Shakespeare, “O Mistress Mine” from *The Tempest*, forms the inspiration for the first song we hear. The delightful piano part is lightly delivered by Taylor, over which Moulton Faux spins her line beautifully. It is followed by a non-Shakespeare piece, a Swiss folksong, that seems in its innocence the perfect continuation.

It is in the scene from *The Tempest* that the magic truly opens out, the voices creating a sort of post-Mendelssohn *Midsummer Night’s Dream* sort of magic. The duet between Ariel and the Sprites, “Come unto these yellow sands,” cedes to the lonely, lovely countertenor of Nicolas Tamagna in “Where should this music be?” (How magical the addition of the Sprites to this is!) The piano’s tolling for “Full Fathom Five,” beautifully done by Taylor, forms the perfect backdrop to the trio between Ariel and the two Sprites.

Prospero’s “Our revels now are ended” is full of regret at the end of one of life’s chapters; its tissue-thin close is brilliantly delivered by Taylor. Perhaps it is the multi-voice songs that shine brightest, though; from *Love’s Labours Lost*, *The Owl Sings (for Winter)*, featuring Moulton Faux and Krumm, is an utter delight.

Interestingly, Williams provides her own text to *Celia Sings: Be Merry*, a take on part of act I, scene 2 of *As You Like It*. It is followed by Williams's amended text of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "How do I love thee?" (Sonnet 43), itself followed by a remarkably dramatic setting of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, "Let me not to the marriage of these minds / Admit impediments," in which Moulton Faux and Taylor meld musically to provide another stratum of pure poetry.

There's no missing the sound-painting of the inclement weather in *Feste's Song* from *Twelfth Night* ("When that I was a little tiny boy"), rather more obvious than anything heard so far on the disc. This is surely deliberate, and effective to boot. A similar feeling is conveyed by *Blow, blow, thou Winter Wind*.

A non-Shakespeare text comes in the form of Nicholas Breton's *A Sweet Lullaby* from *The Arbor of Amorous*. It is surprisingly leaden until we read the text as the text speaks of "thy father's shame, thy mother's grief." This is as poignant a lullaby as one is likely to encounter. Williams's setting is unforgettable, the clouds of which are only banished by the trio portion of *Blow, blow, thou Winter Wind* from *As You Like It*.

I wonder if there is any more musically fragrant invocation of Shakespearean Nature than in Williams's *Plot of the Fairy Queen*, a setting of Oberon's "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows" from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It nearly had me in tears.

The programming is thought through with extreme care. A cuckoo, an owl, and then Celia all "sing"; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet is followed by Shakespeare's Sonnet 116; and the disc concludes with three Christmas-oriented songs. The first, *Christmas Words*, is taken from *Hamlet* (Marcellus's "It faded on the crowing of the cock" plus Horatio's "So have I heard, and do in part believe it"), while the beautifully innocent *Manger Scene* has a text by Williams herself, inspired by children "playing Christmas." It is absolutely as charming as the idea itself sounds, crowned by the addition of counter-tenor Nicholas Tamagna. Perhaps the only arrangement comes in the manner of a perfectly judged encore, the English carol *Tomorrow shall be my Dancing Day* (simply entitled *My Dancing Day* here). It provides a glorious close to a glorious disc.

Recorded in beautiful sound and accompanied by an extensive, scholarly booklet note by Kirsten Santos Rutschman, this is a major release. Moulton Faux has a wide vocal range (*Come away, Death* takes her to its lower portions, and she triumphs). The disc itself is entitled "Where should this music be?" The answer, surely, is in our hearts and minds. Thank goodness for discoveries such as this, and

for performers and record companies brave enough to bring them to our attention. This is a Want List contender, and even more, a true treasure trove.

FEATURE REVIEW BY HUNTLEY DENT

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Shakespeare devoted only one life to producing his plays, but countless lives have been devoted to them ever since. Unlike G. B. Shaw, who coined the derisive term “bardolatry” to describe Shakespeare worship, many great composers were enticed to set Shakespearean texts. I didn’t realize, however, that the list needs to be much more amplified to include, for example, the 34 women composers who set a single song, “O mistress mine” from *Twelfth Night*, of which the leading group, 14 in all, were Americans, including the North Carolina composer Lola Williams.

Williams had a consuming passion for Shakespeare’s writing. She intended to take every play and do homage to it with an essay of analytical commentary, an original verse of her own, and a song setting of a lyrical passage. Since she undertook this project only in later life, after retiring from teaching English and music in Durham, North Carolina, and being widowed, Williams didn’t achieve her goal. She did leave behind a trove of Shakespeare songs, which form the bulk of this fascinating album.

Williams was self-taught and so modest that at times she sought compositional instruction from a music undergraduate of her acquaintance. The two plays that have inspired the most music are *Twelfth Night*, which features a line everyone knows, “If music be the food of love, play on!,” and *As You Like It*, but songs populate the entire Shakespeare canon. Born in 1913, Williams undertook her project in 1973 and persisted for two decades; she died at the remarkable age of 99 in 2013. Except for one public occasion when two of her songs were sung and exposure through an amateur music club, her compositions went unperformed in her lifetime.

This unique back story can’t help but enhance the present release, which is the premiere recording of the 19 songs on the program, variously set for solo voice, duet, and trio. Sincerity and depth of feeling mark every item, and Williams would have been delighted at the caliber of these performances. The guiding force is soprano Sarah Moulton Faux, who entered by serendipity. Williams’s son Derek had stored boxes of his mother’s compositions in his basement. Derek had taught history at Phillips Andover Academy, where Moulton Faux was one of his pupils. After she was contacted by him, Moulton Faux and conductor Ted Taylor, who serves as the sympathetic and accomplished pianist here, undertook the seemingly

endless task of combing through piles of hand-written drafts, eventually compiling the songs on this disc (and presumably many more).

Listeners who have any level of devotion to Shakespeare will recognize familiar and unfamiliar verses, with an immediate attraction to Williams's musical response. She didn't write her songs to be inserted into the plays—some pieces, like *Scene from "The Tempest,"* depicting Ferdinand washed up on Prospero's island, were not written as lyrics for a song. Williams was attracted primarily to the comedies, and she has a light, winsome touch in a comical number like *Feste's Song*, intended for the clown in *Twelfth Night*. She rises to her best, I think, in wistful romance, as in "Sigh no more, ladies" from *Much Ado*.

The four singers have impressive artist's bios including performances at New York City Opera and the Met. Moulton Faux, who sings 13 songs solo, has a melting lyric-coloratura soprano; she blends beautifully in duets and trios with mezzos Heather Johnson and Laura Krumm. Countertenor Nicholas Tamagna has a warm tone and notable artistry in his singing. (He is a reminder that any song for a female character would have been sung by a boy in Elizabethan theaters.) There's a joyful quality to all the singing that goes to the heart of Williams's love for composing. Technically her idiom, as I hear it, harks back to the parlor songs she would have encountered as a child; there's an aura of the Victorian drawing room in many of the songs, which don't veer into sentimentality, however. You feel a genuine connection between the composer and the literary genius she adored.

My only caveat is that the voices could have been miked more closely; the ample ambience blurs their diction at times, so it's good that New World provides full texts. The Shakespeare setting of Lola Williams may never receive a second CD, and if they did, it would be hard to match the level of music-making on this one. Warmly recommended.