

DVD Review: Artis Wodehouse

by Michael Hendron

THIS DVD records a live performance by Artis Wodehouse playing a set of ten pieces by Arthur Bird—collectively, his Opus 37. The set was composed for, and performed at Merkin Hall, New York City on, a Mason & Hamlin reed organ on April 24th, 2006.

It happens this author has played through this music, has performed some of it, and has played the very instrument used in the recital. It is a Mason & Hamlin Style 86K, manufactured around 1900, superbly restored and tuned by Kenneth C. Pratt of West Virginia. I personally chose not to use this instrument for this music because the organ possesses a (very fine) 16-ft treble rank, as well as a Pedal Point mechanism of unusually broad compass, both features not called-for in Bird's musical score. In her performance, Ms. Wodehouse does not use the Pedal Point device, and I must suppose that the 16-ft Clarionet has either been disconnected from the Full Organ mechanism, or it didn't make much difference after all.

Since this recording comes with no program, allow me to share what I know about the Music. Arthur Bird was born in Massachusetts in 1856, and died in Berlin in 1923. From a musical American family, he studied music in the Berlin Hochschule, served as a church organist in Nova Scotia, returned to Germany to study composition, became a close friend and disciple of Franz Liszt, and worked as the Berlin correspondent for the Chicago Journal, *Musical Leader*. He settled in Berlin and most of his music was published in Germany. The *Grove Musical Dictionary* states that "contemporary critics agree that his music, late-Romantic in style, was pleasing and melodious, and that he was an excellent contrapuntist." The 10 Pieces of Op. 37 were published in 1897 by Paul Koeppen of Berlin, part of a catalogue of music (original works and arrangements) by Richard Eichberg and Paul Hassenstein, two other advocates of the reed organ. Bird's 10 Pieces, which Ms. Wodehouse performs in their published order, are: Meditation, Präludium, Adagio, Reverie, Postlude, Improvisato, Offertoire, Scherzo, Auf dem Lande, and Pastorale.

It is good to see serious reed organ music being performed in a professional, apparently urban setting. The organ shares a stage with a Steinway Grand piano, acoustic baffles behind, and high-tech microphones, all in view of a live audience and a single-perspective camera. One wonders what else occurred at this concert. The camera-work is very good, allowing the viewer to feel as a part of the audience.

Bird's 10 Pieces are a showcase for the artistic American reed organ. To say they are idiomatic is an

understatement. They are very carefully composed to take full musical advantage of Mason & Hamlin's high-end single-manual organs. Bird shows us the variety of speaking stops and highlights the division of the organ's action (the "break"). Bird indicates every stop to be pulled or cancelled, and I can say from experience that the manipulation of registration in Bird's pieces is every bit as important to the music as the notes on the page.

Ms. Wodehouse's performance does full justice to these pieces, and to the reed organ she plays. She is an accomplished performer, has mastered the score, and knows her instrument. Her technical facility is very impressive. She observes every dynamic indication, plays every note on the page with assurance, and gives us a committed, convincing rendition of these interesting beautiful works.

In this performance of the set, there are a few flubbed notes or phrases, but really *very* few, and most will go unnoticed by most listeners. I applaud Ms. Wodehouse for reducing the seven pages of printed music to the four she has in front of her—no page-turner to worry about—but she fails to observe a repeat, misses a stop change which must then be corrected, and gets slightly lost elsewhere. However, the two-octave scale in thirds, which finishes the piece, is perfect. Overall, my only quibble with this performance is her insistence on allowing the last chord of every piece to simply die away by stopping her treadling: some chords are not even held their full value, at least audibly. Only five of the pieces should end softly, and only one of those—Pastoral—*must* fade away to nothing due to the pedal points in the bass. The choice to end all ten pieces in this unsupported way is puzzling. Apart from this, here "winding" of the organ is irreproachable.

It is always interesting to hear another player's interpretation of music one knows. In truth, this score has very few indications as to musical phrasing or touch, which forces each performer to create a unique statement. Personally, I believe a bit more could have been made of this music: there is the occasional clipped phrase, a certain lack of breadth, or a missed musical opportunity. But I certainly commend this performance and the skill of Artis Wodehouse.

The DVD can be purchased from Joseph Patrych for \$10.00. He can be contacted at jppiano@aol.com, by phone at (718) 367-5385 or by mail at Joseph Patrych Sound Studios, 2410 Tiebout Ave., Bronx NY 10458.

A CD-quality audio recording is forthcoming.