

Maryanne Amacher – *Petra* – Blank Forms 005

By Jason Bivins



The late, great composer Maryanne Amacher is mostly known for her experiments at the sonic extremes of electronics and tape manipulation. I can still remember vividly the feeling of a sound snaking through my brainpan at will when I first heard her music. So it was with a sense of surprise and curiosity that I learned that Amacher’s “Petra” was written for twin pianos.

The 1991 composition – recorded here by Marianne Schroeder and Stefan Tcherepnin – is spacious and resonant. While it sounds initially as if more indebted to Morton Feldman, Giacinto Scelsi, or Eva-Maria Houben than the aural wizardry more commonly associated with Amacher, careful listening reveals some of the constants of Amacher’s music. Her longstanding interest in playing sonic elements off one another and her attention to space and acoustic effects are on display in this vivid performance.

The opening is bright and percussive to the point of being somewhat jarring. But what follows takes in an impressive range of dynamics and ideas. There are long passages of hush, and elsewhere stuttering rhythms. The pianists make good use of the acoustic of New York’s St. Peter’s Episcopal, where this was recorded in 2017, letting the lyrical passages ring across the air, or easing into the ruminative chordal movement as if gently atop rippling water.

The music, though, is anything but static. As much as it returns, pendulum-like, to a space of introspection and faint mournfulness, Amacher is interested in the tension to be found in the space where different ideas encounter each other. So even in the most spacious and elegant moments, one piano will introduce harmonic clusters, or punchy chords. It has the interesting effect of emphasizing the lyricism rather than undercutting it. And during its final passages, filled with swells and drones and then a long cool-down with increasing space between the notes, it’s tempting to think of Petra as some sort of geologic system. Marvelous stuff, from a much-missed voice.

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