


CD Review by Michael Cameron

 **WAS MY BROTHER IN THE BATTLE? SONGS OF WAR • Stephen Swanson (bar); David Gompper (pn); Nicole Esposito (fl, pic) • ALBANY TROY 1056 (62:18)**

SCHEER (arr. Musiker) Voices from World War II. STEFFE Battle Hymn of the Republic . FOSTER We are coming, Father Abraam. Was my brother in the battle? IVES Tom Sails Away. In Flanders Fields. He is there! LEHRER So Long, Mom (A Song for World War III). The Wild West is where I want to be. FLANDERS & SWANN The Ostrich. HARNICK Merry Little Minuet. BOGLE (arr. Gompper) And the band played Waltzing Matilda . DYLAN (arr. Gompper) Masters of War. PAXTON (arr. Gompper) Jimmy Newman. GOMPPER Mrs. Bixby's Sons

While not as palpable as in current pop music and film or as fiercely strident as in earlier war eras, a new wave of anti-war sentiment began to exert its influence on classical music culture a couple years ago. Historical comparison of the effect of war on the American psyche is precisely the aim of a new disc of 19 songs by baritone Stephen Swanson and pianist David Gompper on Albany records. "Was My Brother in the Battle? Songs of War" takes its name in part from a Civil War song by Stephen Foster. Many of these songs adopt a narrow view of their subject, but heard as an entire recital, as they were originally presented at the University of Iowa in 2007, they present a complex and nuanced view of their subject.

Considering the pacifist leanings of most artists in the last half-century, it is a jolt to recall that Ives, America's greatest musical radical, was also one of its most fervent pro-war patriots during WW I. If, like me, you cut your teeth on Jan DeGaetani and Gilbert Kalish's landmark recording on Nonesuch, you may find the approach of Swanson and Gompper too, well, beautiful. They are certainly not the only duo to find buffed contours where DeGaetani and Kalish find sharper edges, and after a couple of run-throughs I began to appreciate the cohesiveness of their approach.

A favorite of many of America's top vocalists, Gene Scheer's credentials are impeccable. I find his song cycle *Voices from World War II* lyrically engaging but musically generic, often not reflective of the turmoil suggested by the text. The exception is "At Howard Hawks' House," skillfully infused with the era's swing sensibility. Swanson's warm lyric baritone gets to the heart of the cycle, although Nathan Gunn's superb rendering on EMI is tough to beat.

Gompper's *Mrs. Bixby's Sons* is one of the more engaging numbers of the disc. The setting of Lincoln's famous letter of condolence moves with a simple easy gait at the outset and steadily rises in angst and ambiguity. The readings of Stephen Foster songs are spot-on, and Gompper's arrangement of Bob Dylan's *Masters of War* survives the transfer remarkably well. The dark humor of satirical offerings from Tom Lehrer, Michael Flanders, Donald Swann, Tom Paxton, and Sheldon Harnick hit their mark with the biting precision of Dr. Strangelove.

Given the wealth of fascinating historical and biographical information provided and its overriding conceptual triumph, the producers of this disc missed the year of composition of several of the songs. For example, the three Ives songs are listed with relevant and fascinating tidbits of historical context, but the listener is left guessing when the songs were actually composed. At least the dates appear digitally encoded when viewed on a computer monitor; alas, two of them are wildly inaccurate. This oversight notwithstanding, this is a superb recording, one best savored as it was conceived, in a single recital-length hearing. **Michael Cameron**