

Glass Houses for Marimba. Music by Ann Southam; arranged by Greg Harrison and Jonny Smith. Performers: Taktus (Greg Harrison, Jonny Smith, marimbas). Toronto: Centrediscs CMC-CD 21415, 2015. 1 compact disc (46:21). Contents: No. 5 (5:21) – No. 13 (9:34) – No. 1 (6:08) – No. 7 (7:26) – No. 8 (9:38) – No. 9 (7:30).

Ann Southam (1937-2010) was a member of the Canadian League of Composers, a Canadian Music Centre (CMC) Associate Composer, and the first president of the Association of Canadian Women Composers. Among the honours bestowed on her were the CMC's Friends of Canadian Music Award and the Order of Canada. For many years, Southam was known chiefly as a composer of electronic music, much of which was conceived to accompany modern dance. But after creating about thirty electronic works for the Toronto Dance Theatre 1968-1983, she pivoted toward writing for acoustic instruments.

Southam became drawn to minimalist music, which she likened to the kinds of tasks women have traditionally performed such as weaving, sewing, mending, and washing dishes. She heard beauty in the music's understated simplicity, which is built on ostinatos, often layered unusually on consonant harmonies, undergoing incremental alteration, recombination, and repetition.

Beginning with *Rivers* (1979-81; revised 2004) and *Glass Houses* (1981; revised and expanded 2009), both of which were recorded by the pianist, Christina Petrowska Quilico, Southam went on to write numerous minimalist compositions for a variety of instrumental forces over the next thirty years, including *Song of the Varied Thrush* (1991) for string quartet, *Webster's Spin* (1993) and *Music for Strings* (2000), both for string orchestra, and *Full Circles* (1996/2005) for Arraymusic, the Toronto new-music ensemble. Collaborations with another pianist, Eve Egoyan, led to a major series of late keyboard works including *Figures* (2001) for piano and orchestra, and *Qualities of Consonance* (1998), *In Retrospect* (2004), *Simple Lines of Enquiry* (2009) and *Returnings* (2010), all for solo piano.

The CD under review features six of the fifteen pieces that make up Southam's *Glass Houses*, performed by Taktus, the marimbist duo of Greg Harrison and Jonny Smith. In the CD booklet, Harrison comments that he was inspired to arrange the work by Quilico's performance of one of the pieces from *Glass Houses* on a CMC podcast in 2009. However, he soon realized that the music was impossible to arrange for a single marimba, so instead he re-scored it for two performers, one playing the ostinato and the other the melodies.



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About *Glass Houses*, Southam explained that the work was playfully devised along the lines of Terry Riley's *In C*. The music itself takes up very few pages, but the instructions for performance ("the rules of the game") take up many more. The organizing principles are pitch and choice, in which one performer's choice determines the possibilities available to the next person or group entering.

It comes as no surprise to learn that Southam was thrilled with the results when Harrison and Smith played some of their transcriptions for her. The sound of these two instruments serenely spinning out Southam's triadic and pentatonic patterns, with their unpredictable offbeat accents, hemiolas, and meters offset between the two parts, brings to mind fortuitous echoes that are likely absent when hearing piano performances of the work: I'm thinking especially of the diatonic marimba traditions of Central and West Africa, but also of passing hints of Caribbean steel-drum music (in tracks 1 and 6).

As presented by Taktus, this set of pieces from Southam's *Glass Houses* is mesmerizing. The playing is impeccable and sensitive, the pick-up is clean, and the playback sound is rich. My one regret is that the disc lasts only forty-six minutes, leaving ample room for more of this captivating music. I would have been very pleased to hear the duo perform additional pieces from *Glass Houses* or another of Southam's works. Nevertheless, I give this disc my highest recommendation.

S. Timothy Maloney
University of Minnesota