

Review

Amidst the Shades album review – Ruby Hughes' captivating Dowland tribute is steeped in delicious melancholy



**Ruby Hughes/Jonas Nordberg/Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann
(BIS)**

Joined by lutenist Nordberg and Brinkmann's viola da gamba, the soprano's homage to the Renaissance composer is captivating and persuasive



Photograph: Phil Sharp

John Dowland died 400 years ago this year, and we'll be lucky indeed if there are many other tributes as captivating as this one from the soprano [Ruby Hughes](#), lutenist Jonas Nordberg and viola da gamba player Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann. The music is by no means all Dowland – in fact, the recording takes its title from a song by Purcell, and one of its most memorable tracks is a spellbinding version of the Corpus Christi Carol as set by Britten – but Hughes's voice retains a natural quality for all

its refinement, which has been skilfully captured – the recording is close enough for her to be able to be soft and confiding, but there's still a sense of space around the sound. She's more vocally demonstrative than some, colouring each word individually: when in Dowland's *Flow, My Tears* she sings of "fear, and grief, and pain", we're left in no doubt that these are three different but equally terrible emotions. And yet she, Nordberg and Brinkmann hold all this in balance, maintaining a persuasive sense of line and focus so that the expressivity registers not as indulgence but as communication. This is just as evident in the music by Dowland's contemporaries and in Purcell as it is in the four new or recent compositions based on Shakespeare's song lyrics at the end, by Deborah Pritchard, Errollyn Wallen and Cheryl Frances-Hoad.

Erica Jeal

Ruby Hughes Amidst the Shades

BIS



Ruby has produced a jewel of a song recital

For an excellent recital singer, clarity and expressiveness is obviously required, plus a voice that, song after song, will bring a smile to the audience's ears. Equally important, though, are intelligence and sensitivity in interpreting the words being sung. The Welsh soprano **Ruby Hughes**, scores strongly in all departments. She is also a lively recital programmer.

Consider *Amidst the Shades*, a most striking album that begins with John Dowland and other late Elizabethans, progresses through Purcell and ends with songs from three contemporary British composers. The music is often sorrowful and the ambience always intimate: qualities amplified by the two accompanists, principally the lutenist Jonas Nordberg (nimble eloquent), with assistance from the warm growl of Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann's viola da gamba.

Whether Hughes is singing Dowland, Deborah Pritchard or Errollyn Wallen, her vocal colourings and phrasings are extraordinarily varied and delicate. Decorative frills in the early items are never overdone. Untouched by any bothersome vibrato, she's in firm control of every register and dynamic, and is particularly affecting singing pianissimo and beyond, as if expressing her private thoughts. There's no weakness in the repertoire, either. The sonorous glow of Dowland's melancholia might be unique but the Purcell selections, the lute and gamba solos, and the contemporary items all offer treasures of their own.

Geoff Brown



'Amidst the Shades'

How delightful to be again in the company of soprano Ruby Hughes, lutenist Jonas Nordberg and gambist Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann so long after their acclaimed album 'Heroines of Love and Loss' (5/17), this time amidst the shades of Dowland, Purcell, Britten et al - and in the company of living composers. It is also fascinating to listen to this album in the wake of last year's spectacularly good 'Songs of Passion' by mezzo Lea Desandre, lutenist Thomas Dunford and Ensemble Jupiter (Erato, A/25), which covers some of the same ground - especially since Hughes and Dunford worked together on the latter's 2013 debut release for Alpha, 'Lachrimae', featuring Dowland's lute and vocal music.

'Amidst the Shades' is necessarily more intimate than these two releases. And yet, shorn of three voices, Dowland's four-part lute songs grow rather than shrink in dramatic stature. With a more minimalist continuo, Purcell's songs more piercingly evoke Carissimi's florid monody. And thanks not only to the seamless stylistic transitions from the Renaissance and Baroque material to the new works but to Hughes's impossibly pure soprano so tastefully illuminated by lute and viol, every note here floats not in aspic but in aether. Take that cheeky little lute shake on 'wounding dart' in Dowland's 'Come again' and those *ppps* shaving off into eternity in his 'Flow, my tears', and Hughes's attenuated, sweetly resonant 'Ding dong ding dong bell' in Johnson's 'Full fathom five'. Or the emphatic bitterness of the last iteration of



'Pine, fret, consume, swell, burst and die' in Danyel's tripartite lament 'Mrs ME her Funeral Tears for the Death of her Husband' - in which set Brinkmann's powerfully expressive gamba-playing is also heard for the first time.

Or Purcell's 'O solitude', a masterclass in affective nuance and sustained tension, with Hughes, accompanied only by Nordberg on theorbo, weaving delicate threads torn asunder by restless melismas.

Or Nordberg's arrangement of Britten's 'Corpus Christi Carol', its final line devastatingly etched in air before the lute's rising arpeggio dissolves in darkness, and the masterful realisation of Errollyn Wallen's abundant word-painting in her Purcellian 'The shadow of my sorrow'.

Or the sometimes folk-like, sometimes gospel-like characterisations of Deborah Pritchard's exquisite *a cappella Ophelia's Songs*, and Nordberg's sensitive arrangement of Cheryl Frances-Hoad's funereal 'They bore him bare-faced on the bier'.

Even Nordberg's shakes and divisions peal prayer and passion in Holborne's lute solo *Last Will and Testament* - a mournful complement to Tobias Hume's gamba solo *Loves Farewell*, the space and improvisatory freedom of which Brinkmann relishes.

Such are the riches of this extraordinary album that one would happily linger amidst such shades for all eternity.

William Yeoman

Now imagine you have been immersed in the world of John Dowland's melancholy lute songs and Robert Johnson's Shakespeare settings and Henry Purcell's love songs with lute, all leading to a brand-new setting of Shakespeare's Richard II by Errollyn Wallen, *The Shadow of my Sorrow* commissioned by Soprano Ruby Hughes.

Hughes takes her voice and expressive potential to the limits of this recital. Very elastic performances and a hushed, sometimes tortured intimacy that strains ears and emotions and is luminous and memorable, from Dowland and Purcell to Britten and beyond.

Andrew McGregor



Amidst the Shades

Works by Dowland, Johnson, Purcell, Britten et al

Ruby Hughes (soprano), Jonas Nordberg (lute), Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann (viola da gamba)
BIS BIS-2698 74:48 mins

Once more collaborating with lutenist Jonas Nordberg (who plays archlute as well) and Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann (viola da gamba), soprano Ruby Hughes offers a thoughtful programme that moves from the 16th and 17th centuries on to the 20th and the 21st.

Lute songs by Dowland, John Danyel (his triptych Mrs M. E. Her Funeral Tears for the Death of Her Husband), and Shakespeare's colleague Robert Johnson precede four Purcell items (including the title track) before leaping forwards to Britten's Corpus Christi Carol (in Nordberg's arrangement) and the present day: Cheryl Frances-Hoad has given permission for the lutenist to arrange one of her Shakespeare settings; other Bardic texts set by Errollyn Wallen and Deborah Pritchard are newly commissioned.

A theme of mourning or loss is rarely far away, though Hughes's wide-ranging voice and expressive exploration of text and notes bring plenty of variety. In any case Nordberg introduces livelier solo material in Dowland's Lord Strangs' March and Mrs Winters Jump; though lovely as they are, neither his version of Anthony Holborne's Last Will and Testament nor Brinkmann's Tobias Hume Love's Farewell are designed to raise the spirits.

Yet the result is coherently put together, with Hughes's resourceful vocal imagination and use of tone, plus the subtlety and careful placement of her decorations, drawing the ear again and again. The intimacy of the sound world is finely captured.

George Hall ★★★★★



THE OBSERVER

Amidst the Shades

Ruby Hughes, Jonas Nordberg, Mimé Yamahiro Brinkmann
(BIS)

In the pre-digital, pre-streaming era, singers could rely on single-composer, mainstream choices for albums. Now the defter of them make imaginative programmes to reflect their vocal individuality. *Amidst the Shades* by the soprano Ruby Hughes, with the lutenist Jonas Nordberg and gamba player Mimé Yamahiro Brinkmann, is a fine example.

Hughes and colleagues celebrate the 400th anniversary of John Dowland (c1563-1626), setting his expressive lute songs alongside those of his less familiar contemporaries Robert Johnson, Anthony Holborne and John Danyel. Sharp, fresh colours are added with works by today's composers: Errollyn Wallen, Cheryl Frances-Hoad and Deborah Pritchard. Britten's tender *Corpus Christi Carol* is a must hear. Hughes is never shy to turn her voice as required from elegance and beauty to raw intensity.

Fiona Maddocks