

Dowland's lute songs, printed as they were with the top voice and lute tablature on one page and the remaining alto, tenor and bass parts on the other, have always lent themselves to different modes of performance, from solo voice and lute to various combinations of vocal and instrumental ensembles. In addition, Dowland's numerous lute divisions based on the same tunes give players the option of providing extended preludes and interludes to the songs. Such is the case here, with the difference being that guitarist, lutenist, teacher and composer Peter Croton has arranged his own solo lute parts after the manner of Dowland, the only solo by Dowland himself being the opening Preludium. In addition to his own compositions, five of which are also recorded here, Croton enjoys exploring different styles, including folk, jazz and Latin with his regular performing partner since 2003, Theresia Bothe, whose purity of tone and manner of declamation ensure complete intelligibility of the text at all times. Though that sounds rather prosaic, Bothe has learned as much from singing folk and pop as she has from poring over ancient singing treatises, and the lucidity and flexibility of her interpretations are as a result far ahead of most 'straight' classical artists. The same could be said for Croton, whose playing has a freedom and musicality usually heard only from improvising jazz and pop musicians. Pretty much every item here is a gem: Croton's setting of Shakespeare's Sonnet XXX, which gives the disc its title, is a masterpiece of subtle word-painting; it is also wholly successful in creating a sense of genuine strangeness through the contrasting of the contemporary style of the music with the antiquity both of the text and the lute. The set of three songs which ends the disc – settings of a Theodore Roethke poem, a text by Rumi and Now, 0 now I needs must part (the Dowland setting of which is also on the disc) – were written by Croton for Bothe and long-time collaborator Derek Lee Ragin, a countertenor who here makes his recording debut as a baritone. A personal tribute to Dowland, they draw on earlier compositional procedures while being utterly of our own time. Bothe and Ragin complement each other perfectly, both vocally and musically.

Other highlights include Go crystal tears, Time stands still, Sorrow stay, Flow my tears and Come heavy sleep, in all of which Bothe's pellucid voice floats ethereally over Croton's masterfully executed accompaniments without ever once losing sight of the emotional core of each poem. The only obvious comparisons that come to mind here are with the young Emma Kirkby with Anthony Rooley and, more recently, Carolyn Sampson with Matthew Wadsworth. This is a wonderful disc that successfully evokes the way we live now with a remembrance of things past.

Robert Levett