

Opus One #165 - Frank Retzel *Line Drawings and Earthen Clay Figures*
Ruth Shaw Wylie *Preludes; Soliloquy; Psychogram; Mandala*
The White Raven

This CD is a lovely paean to Ruth Shaw Wylie (1916-1989) by Frank Retzel (1948 -), linking teacher and student, friend and friend. Retzel studied with Wylie at Wayne State University during the 1960's, and the two remained close until Wylie's death. Except for Wylie's *Psychogram*, none of these pieces has been recorded before.

Of Wylie's ten works for piano, half were composed before she was 37. The five pieces on this CD, all played magnificently by Barry David Salwen, span her lifetime, almost one piece every decade, beginning with her *Preludes, Op. 12* (1949) to her last piece for piano *The White Raven Op. 37, No. 2* of 1983. The change in surface and style over those thirty some odd years will not seem surprising to the reader of Music Connoisseur; indeed had Ms. Wylie's musical trajectory not traced a curve from the neoclassic to atonal, passing midway through improvisational experiment, we would surely miss these points along her journey, each one of which display an unabashed spirit of discovery and closeness to her material which should be the envy (and goal) of every composer. The boundaries of each piece are clearly articulated: clean, white picket fences surrounding small, imaginary terrains. To enter is to have the entire perimeter in full view -- a comfort, especially when the landscape itself, as in *Psychogram* and *Mandala*, accomodates only slow, careful walking. *White Raven* lies at the crest, and certainly where the visitor is most likely to stretch out and spend the most time. It is an eerilie seductive place, one that haunts for days after the first hearing.

Frank Retzel's cycle of piano pieces *Line Drawings and Earthen Clay Figures* is comprised of two books: *Sketches* and *Designs in Terracotta*. The first, dedicated to Ruth Shaw Wylie, dates from 1980 and consists of six short pieces, from just under a minute to almost two and a half minutes long. The second, written five years later, is a set of five pieces, again miniatures, each about two minutes duration. Moving quickly, then, both through each piece, and between them (listen to Book I without interruption, inhale, then on to Book II) one has the sense of sketching and making, of things taking shape, the visual afterimage of the previous piece superimposing on the present one. Retzel's linear sense produces wonderfully fuzzy thickets and tangles which alternately -- and ephemerally -- a gestalt, a Rorschach The allusion to the visual arts, Retzel says, "is intentional", and this reviewer, for one, was happy to take him at his word.

It seems proper -- and perhaps even useful -- to say some words not just about the music contained therein, but the CD itself: its entity as a recorded object. Opus One's CD's are now famous (or should be) for their "Earth-friendly packaging." These colorful cardboard packages open out like miniature double LP record albums of yesteryear. It's not until you hold one of these CD's that you realize how much has been lost by the cold, non-tactile packaging of "jewelboxes" (forget the fact that the plastic cracks and is wasteful).

Besides the information printed on the inner and outer sleeves, there is also the obligatory CD booklet. There is loads of information inside about the composers and pieces, including a complete listing of Ruth Shaw Wylie's works. My only criticism is that the contents of the CD are printed four times: inner sleeve, foldover sleeve, back, and on the first page of the booklet. It would have been better to have printed some of the booklet's contents on one (or both) of the sleeves, making it easier on the eye (and saving some paper in the process). The most important thing, however, is that I had never heard any of Ms. Wylie's music before this CD. And, it seems, the chances of my hearing any would have decreased daily, given the level of interest in contemporary music by record companies, radio stations, performing organizations, etc. So, thank you Frank Retzel, Barry Salwen, and Opus One.