

Americans may be unaware of Piano Duo Post & Mulder, but it hasn't stopped these two women from taking Europe by storm with their courageous repertoire of 20th and now 21st century works. There are no easy composition "classics" on the Private Collection CD; everything here was written by a composer with strident vision and an expansive view of the possible for piano duo. The difficulty in any four-hands composition is not only in synchronization, but also in the depth of the attack. Pianissimo to one artist is different than it is to another in terms of the force used to strike the keys. The composers of these works -- Barbara Monk Feldman, Ron Ford, Bern Alois Zimmerman, Richard Ayres, Maarten van Norden, Eric de Clerq, and Huba de Graaf -- have looked for ways in which to enhance the repertoire for four hands, by rearranging its strengths and weaknesses. Pauline Post and Nora Mulder have chosen their works and composers carefully here, and it shows: This is one of the most startling piano duet records of the last century. When they attack Ford's "Tema," from 1996, the listener can hear the "crack" as all four hands line up in force, tension, and synchronization. The piece develops from a one-voice, five-note motif, and gradually expands its tonal, harmonic, and pitch ranges gradually from there. Both musicians play the same notes, pedals down the entire time, and as the speed and density of the "single voice" increases, the work becomes a dense language of symbols, suspended without being able to retract them or send them any further than the reach of this increasingly knotted frame. Feldman's piece, "Two Pianos," was originally written for Frederic Rzewski and Marianne Schroeder. It begins with a five-note theme and a dampened triad from inside the piano. From here, a series of modulations happens on slightly augmented chords. There is space between the phrases, but more because of their duration than anything else. One phrase begets a melodic line that establishes another harmonic relationship to the space in front of another phrase or chord, and so on. It's a labyrinthine work, one that soaks up silence and notions of standard time and meter, since they "appear" to be random constructs in the score. This is the single most moving and beautiful piece here because, while there is no melodic invention in the score per se, each haunted exchange between the two pianists suggests the many that might develop just around the next bend or under the next bridge. The piece floats through the air between the sonorities of the two instruments and exchanges intimate glances, while establishing other, unfixed relationships between overtone and shadowy dissonance. These two works reside on opposite ends of the scale; they showcase the outrageous technical savvy of Post and Mulder as well as their deep ears for subtlety, color, and elegant nuance. Apart from their other recordings, this album reveals the expanses they've attempted to open and master, and here they've succeeded with every score.

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