

## THE RECORDER

### Encores & Curtain Calls: "Humility & Conviction"

By Joseph Marcello

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"I haven't understood a bar of music in my life — but I have felt it."— Igor Stravinsky

You don't need to have a bulldozer to go deep; if you know where to find the gold, you can mine the same treasure much more humbly with a simple spade.

Laura Siersema is a singer-composer-keyboardist who prefers the simple spade. Her creations are seldom if ever complex, often rocking us into her dreamland on the seesaw of a pair of simple if dark-edged chords that she often likes to fracture into recurring kaleidoscopic patterns.

True, often her harmonic color choices are unusual — ambiguous and prismatic, avoiding the predictable progressions and vocabularies that fuel much music in the singer-songwriter domain. But, ultimately, hers is a simple and transparent art, calling little attention to itself or its messenger.

In Siersema's case, the medium itself is the message: a soft, seasoned soprano soaring gently over a hypnotic keyboard mantra, lulling us into an instant alpha — or possibly even delta — wave of peaceful reverie.

There's a bit of attenuated blues in her soulful, quivering voice and of folk-like lullaby. Whether intentional or otherwise, there is an ambiguity to her intonation, at times falling shy of the mark, at other times wavering through and beyond it. There is a certain vulnerability that one might associate with a young girl who was still learning the wayward journeys of her song.

But, putting all of these virtues, vulnerabilities and variables together, we experience a special space, a warm, welcome "zone" of spiritual comfort and peace which we feel no pressing desire to disturb, much less take leave of.

Nor does it at all hinder her fairy-tale-like musing that the woman herself speaks, acts and moves from out of a sense of inner quiet, of almost shy self-restraint. Indeed, it somehow comes as a surprise that a soul this publicly fragile ever managed to arrive intact on the performance stage at all.

It is doubtful we will ever see her at such as the Iron Horse, or any of a host of too visible or brightly lit Pioneer Valley venues. But, for those with ears to hear and hearts willing to relinquish sound and fury and to surrender to what lies beneath them, the fugitive sound visions of Siersema may be just what the soul-doctor ordered.

Of her work, lovely things have been said; a few samples:

"There are a few who can carry us beyond ... by indenting our souls — by effecting change in the soul whereby the mood is retained and perhaps never to be lost ... your music has the power to do just this! You have given a sort of 'storehouse' for our spirit's garden. The places that are in greatest need of nourishment are thereby fulfilled." (Vincent Tripi, haiku poet)

"Her voice beckons mercilessly to the physical world like the bodiless spirit that haunts the mansion on a far-away hill." (Independent Songwriters Magazine Pick of the Month)

A recent conversation with Siersema follows. Like her music, Siersema's choice of expression is spare, chaste and deeply considered, an intriguing fusion of abstemious old New England and mystical New Age sensibilities, framed within a vigilant yet somehow delicate intelligence.

JM: The serenity of your music and your way expressing yourself suggest you've done your time in meditation "on the cushion" ...

LS: Not meditation as such, but other things that fall in that realm.

JM: Like?

LS: Well, bike riding, for one. I think that comes from a tendency to being an interior person, an introverted person, and one who worked with a Jungian therapist for a long time and so I pay a lot of attention to what goes on inside.

JM: That's a kind of (meditation) "cushion."

LS: Yes right ... right.

JM: How did you stumble into music and creating?

LS: (Long silence) (barely audible) Wow ... that's a big question ... I grew up with music all around me and a musical family, so I had that to grow with and I was very much drawn to the piano once I had been given some lessons, but I didn't have lessons for that many years. I remember when I was a little girl, one time playing my chords, an E-flat chord and moving it up the piano, and I was just fascinated you could move it up the piano and how it sounded as you got higher, even though it was the same chord. That kind of thing really intrigued me. And I remember, when I was little, being taken by one piece by Bartok, even though I don't remember what it was. There was an element of that kind of ...

JM: ... angular (non-traditional, higher-tension) harmony?

LS: That's exactly the word I was going to say, angular and the willingness to step out of bounds. So I think that was something that was resonating, even though I couldn't have expressed it at the time. In deep retrospect, I would say that.

JM: What kind of music was floating through the air through your childhood?

LS: It was predominantly acoustic music, folk music and church music.

JM: I go out on quite a limb and people have a hard time trusting I mean it when I say I believe that virtually everything that is within a person is revealed in both their speaking or singing voice and their music. And your music is very paradoxical, as I experience it both intuitively and analytically. It's very simple, really almost so simple that I could believe that you had never taken lessons and yet there's an intelligence about it that's informed from an interior place which creates true originality and I'm using that word in its true meaning, "emerging from the origin, the source" as opposed to merely being novel or different. This duality of a simplicity and a uniqueness is very refreshing.

LS: Oh, that's so fascinating. That's just wonderful to hear, thank you so much for having the ability to have that perspective and for me of having the opportunity to hear it. That's really something ... quite wonderful.

JM: Yes, there's this combination of humility and conviction at the same time.

LS: Well, I will tell you, as time goes on, I had been beginning these solo piano works and larger works with voice, which were really a reworking of works I'd had on an earlier album. But, what was being infused into the music now was that modern angular aspect of journey that I could not have done earlier because I wasn't there yet. It's almost as if they mark the depth along this inner way, much as these caves in France, which I've never been to, take you along some central inner journey. These are my ways to God.

JM: You feel, when you're performing them, that you're at your inmost center ...

LS: Yes, that's ultimately where I'd like to be. When I go out to play, it really is to bring out something from the other side, or to bring up something which I have written because those "stillness" variations are very precisely written out and not in any way improvised. There are times in all this when I have

gone through some inner door of compositional understanding that you have to be willing to accept, writing down something that you have never heard, that you can't even question, but just (be) open to receiving.

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