

**CLASSICAL**



Touch Harmonious  
Nicholas Cords

**NICHOLAS CORDS**  
*Touch Harmonious*

Cords, viola

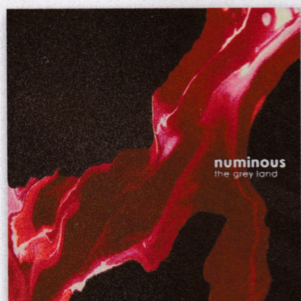
In a Circle Records ICR018 (CD, auditioned in 16/44.1), 2020. Nicholas Cords, Jody Elff, prods.; Jody Elff, eng.

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★

**SONICS** ★★★★★

As violist for both the Silkroad Ensemble and Brooklyn Rider, a string quartet of young guys who mix Glass, Sting, and Shaw with Haydn, Bartók, and Beethoven, Nicholas Cords is accustomed to moving through music of diverse centuries and cultures. How fitting, then, that his second solo album, *Touch Harmonious*, brings the Baroque era into the present with a mix of cello masterpieces and new commissions that find unity in the music of J.S. Bach. Stitched together by Bach's beloved and irresistibly tuneful Cello Suite No.1 in G Major (arranged for viola), whose themes resurface in Britten's Cello Suite No.3, Op.87 (written for but never recorded by Mstislav Rostropovich) and Anna Clyne's "Rest These Hands," the album mixes two Baroque-influenced pieces written for him, Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky's "Short Epitaph" and Dana Lyn's "endlessly i would have walked," with 18th century works by Abel and Handel.

What stands out most is how big-boned and beautiful his close-miked viola sounds. His viola may not be able to harness the weight, dynamic range, bite, and technical freedom of Pieter Wispelwey's cello on his recording of Bach's Cello Suite No.1 for Channel Classics—no doubt the limited dynamic range of Red Book PCM vs DSD64 also plays a part—but he is almost as convincing. The album has a few little blemishes and one major misstep—a Handel aria that lacks a singer's expressive flexibility—but there are also huge successes. The Britten is tremendous, and the new works fascinating for their time-traveling profundity and ability to showcase the viola as a medium for both joy and sorrow.—Jason Victor Serinus



numinous  
the grey land

**JOSEPH C. PHILLIPS JR.**  
*The Grey Land: A Mono-Opera*

Rebecca L. Hargrove, soprano; Kenneth Browning, narrator; Numinous, Phillips, cond. New Amsterdam Records (CD, auditioned in 24/96 WAV). 2020. Phillips, Oded Lev-Ari, prods.; Ryan Streber, eng.

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★

**SONICS** ★★★★★

Calling one's creation a "mono-opera" risks sounding like you're flirting with the disease that exhausted some of us in our youth. But Joseph C. Phillips and Numinous, his flexible instrumental ensemble, harness a haunting and deeply moving amalgam of monologue, song, and wordless vocal/instrumental passages to explore a disease prevalent among Americans of all ages: the divisions born of racial prejudice and inequity. With a quote from prescient American author Richard Wright as its preface—my father was Wright's lawyer c. 1950—Phillips joins his own words with those of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, abolitionist Frederick Douglas, Mothers of the Movement, and others to convey the pain of a Black mother who loses her son to police violence.

Shorn of the safety net of historical distance that enables us to shake our heads, weep, and then walk away from the tragedies of yore, *The Grey Land* plants us resolutely in the present. Its seeds may lie deep in the soil of the American experience, but its immediate impetus grew out of the racial confrontations of Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer of 2014.

As much as the libretto addresses the core of the issue, it's Phillips's score that defines the pain as universal. Anything *but* hectoring and maudlin, his restless, churning, and strangely beautiful music forges a path straight to the heart. Although the recording may lack the film, video art, and choreography that will grace *The Grey Land* in its final form, what we have here is so compelling and original that it must be heard.—Jason Victor Serinus