

MUSIC ●●●●○ SONICS ●●●●○

Phillips: *The Grey Land*. Hargrove, Browning. Numinous. New Amsterdam Records (CD, HDtracks.com 24/96).

The America of 2020 will surely be remembered as a nation ravaged by the worst worldwide health crisis in a century and for a previously unseen level of political polarization. Less certain, but possible, is that the “City upon a Hill” began to truly come to grips with the stain of systemic racism. This moment, and the history leading up to it, is considered by the composer Joseph C. Phillips, Jr. in *The Grey Land*, released by New Amsterdam Records shortly before Thanksgiving.

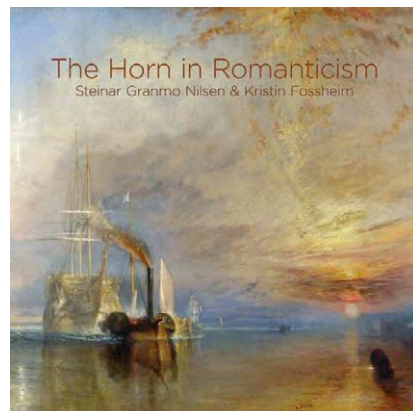
Now in his early 50s, Phillips began his career as a high school music teacher in Washington State but relocated to New York City in the late 1990s to focus on composition. Phillips writes what he calls “mixed music,” incorporating contemporary classical techniques as well as world and pop styles, jazz, and electronica. His work is often politically charged. The composer, who is Black, has said “I have an obligation to myself and to the ancestors to raise my musical voice in solidarity.” *The Grey Land* is a mono-opera—there’s a single soprano role sung by Rebecca L. Hargrove—comprising 13 scenes running a bit over an hour. It explores the challenge of raising a Black child to survive in America—the actual words of the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and others who perished in racially motivated confrontations are heard. The most effective scene is the

longest, the 19-minute “Ferguson: Summer of 2014” that references Samuel Barber’s minor masterpiece, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. The latter is a vocal setting of the preamble to James Agee’s *A Death in the Family* that evokes the idyllic mood of a peaceful neighborhood as remembered by a child. The first seven words of the text by the writer and theater director Isaac Butler that Phillips sets are the same as Barber’s—“It has become that time of evening”—but then the descriptions diverge, as a barely perceptible malaise is sensed in this Black community. A narrator (Kenneth Browning) enters to provide, documentary-style, the horrific details of Michael Brown’s killing at the hands of a Ferguson police officer.

Other scenes get their words from the African-American poet and novelist Paul Lawrence Dunbar (“We Wear the Mask”), Frederick Douglass, Supreme Court justice Sonia Sotomayor...and, briefly, Carolyn Bryant Donham, the white woman whose false accusation of Emmett Till, later recanted, eventuated in the 14-year-old’s savage lynching in 1955. Joseph Phillips himself supplies texts for several scenes, including his deconstruction of several racist myths—the “magical Negro” and the “black bogeyman,” for example. Phillips also provides a version of “The Talk” that Black parents feel they must have with their children to lessen the chance of harassment, or worse, by law enforcement authorities. *The Grey Land*’s tone is, variously, angry, wistful, haunted, and hallucinogenic. It’s an agonizing journey but, somehow, one that holds out the promise of a better world.

The performance by Numinous, the ensemble founded by Phillips two decades ago, and the electronic realizations are highly accomplished. New Amsterdam’s recording, engineered by Ryan Streber and mixed by Brian Montgomery, is necessarily a somewhat synthetic presentation in the manner of a good pop recording, revealing and impactful. The half-dozen or so handbells played during the Sotomayor scene (“Liberty Bell”) register with striking clarity. **Andrew Quint**

Further Listening: Anthony Davis: *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*



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***The Horn in Romanticism*.** Nilsen, Fossheim. 2L (SACD + Pure Audio Blu-ray).

The French horn only acquired valves in the 1800s. Before that, players produced pitches that weren’t in the instrument’s natural harmonic series by jamming a hand into the bell. “Stopping” will create all the notes needed for chromatic music, but the sound is obviously different—muffled and darker. Valves were definitely progress, yet there remains a fondness among composers, players, and listeners for the natural horn of earlier times. Steinar Granmo Nilsen is a master of both valveless and modern instruments and opens his program with *Villanelle* by Paul Dukas, which, though written for a modern French horn, requires the soloist to employ stopped notes in the work’s opening section. As a gently nostalgic tribute to the older instruments, it’s quite effective. Performing on several “historical horns,” Nilsen also offers music by Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Chabrier, Czerny, Schumann, and both Richard and Franz Strauss. The last named, the famous composer’s father, was a professional player who led the horn section for the premieres of several Wagner operas. His lyrical *Nocturno* may be the album’s highlight. Nilsen is accompanied by Kristin Fossheim on a restored fortepiano, which lends further authenticity to the performances. 2L’s sound is characteristically warm and spacious. **AQ**

Further Listening: Schumann: *Konzertstück for 4 Horns*