

COCKTAILS FOR TWO • Frederick Hodges, Richard Dowling (pn) • RIVERMONT BSW-2248 (51:35)

JOHNSTON/COSLOW *Cocktails for Two*. **PORTER** *Begin the Beguine*. **LIEURANCE** *By the Waters of Minnetonka*. **BARNES** *Dainty Miss*. **DE ROSE** *Deep Purple*. **BROWN** *Doll Dance, Rag Doll*. **BEIDERBECKE** *In a Mist*. **LECUONA** *Malagueña*. **GERSHWIN** *Short Story*. **FREED/BROWN** *The Wedding of the Painted Doll*. **BRAGGIOTI** *Variations on Yankee Doodle*

Hodges and Dowling (or Dowling and Hodges, if you prefer!) have vibrant and enduring solo careers. Dowling's three-CD set of Scott Joplin's complete piano music (BSW-2240) is one of the highlights of the Rivermont catalog, and Hodges, a ragtime specialist as well, also has recorded extensively and performed all over the world. How lucky we are that they also take time to perform and record together, both preserving the memory of and educating new fans about the importance of duo pianism in American popular music. I was glad, when I opened Rivermont's booklet, to see photos of Victor Arden and Phil Ohman (one of my favorite duos), Al and Lee Reiser, and others. It takes talent to master a piano, obviously, but it takes a different kind of talent to succeed as a duo pianist. Hodges and Dowling are in possession of both types of talent, and they also have excellent tastes, as demonstrated by the selections on this program.

Some of these pieces have been arranged by Hodges himself, and not without wink in his eye. (His brilliant, virtuosic version of *Cocktails for Two* suggests that said cocktails are being enjoyed by an American in Paris. It almost banishes memories of Spike Jones's immor(t)al send-up of this song!) In addition to his original arrangements, Hodges also painstakingly transcribed Zez Comfrey's piano roll arrangement of *By the Waters of Minnetonka* and created a two-piano performance version from it. *Begin the Beguine* was arranged by Cy Walter, another great duo pianist, and several other selections were arranged by Jacques Fray, a duo pianist who worked with Mario Braggioti, who in turn is represented by his witty set of variations (in the style of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, and finally Gershwin) on *Yankee Doodle*. Thus, despite the vintage quality of these melodies, they are presented in both old and new versions on this program. Sure, there's an element of kitsch to playing popular tunes (from a time when tunes were truly tuneful) in splashy arrangements for two pianos, but I don't have a problem with that, do you?

In each selection, the two pianists create a crisp, sparkling, and symphonic sound. Hodges (left channel) plays a Yamaha concert grand, and Dowling (right channel) plays a Fazioli concert grand, and the subtle differences between the two pianos increase the delightful complexity of their massed sound. The superb engineering also helps.

I don't know whether to bless or curse the two pianists for including Fray's version of Nacio Herb Brown's *The Wedding of the Painted Doll*. (The original lyrics were by Arthur Freed.) That's because whenever I hear this tune, it remains stuck in my head for the next two weeks and more or less drives me crazy. But it's a *good* kind of crazy...! (If you want a treat, go to YouTube to see the song's appearance in *The Broadway Melody* from 1929, which was the first sound film to win an Academy Award for Best Picture. The choreography is dated and the dancing is more athletic than graceful, but that just adds to the charm.)

These duo pianists recorded a Gershwin album for Rivermont (*Gershwin for Two Pianos*, BSW-2227), and if it is even half as delightful as *Cocktails for Two*, it needs to be heard. Duo

pianism never really died, yet Dowling and Hodges (or Hodges and Dowling, if you prefer!) have done much to give it a shot of adrenaline with this new release. Don't deny yourself the pleasure! **Raymond Tuttle**

5 stars – Brilliant fun! I didn't stop smiling.