

URSULA OPPENS

PIANO

AUDIOPHILE AUDITION

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TOBIAS PICKER: 4 Etudes for Ursula; Old and Lost Rivers; 3 Pieces for Piano; Where the Rivers Go; When the Soft Voices Die; The Blue hula; Keys to the City – Ursula Opens, & Tobias Picker, pianos – Wergo 6695, 72:10 ** [Distr. by Harmonia mundi]:**

I first came across Tobias Picker's name in an orchestral recording of *Old and Lost Rivers*, based on a sign he saw in Texas pointing to two rivers. It remains his most popular piece, and with good reason, as if tonality needed any approbation from the general public: it is beautiful, completely accessible, and very American in style. Not all of the pieces on this well-played disc by his old friend Ursula Oppens are; his *Three Pieces for Piano* are diffuse and too congested for my taste, Picker's [music](#) often wandering the no-man's land between tonality and atonality. *Four Etudes for Ursula* are genuine etudes, not simply names, and exploit lyric and mechanistic playing, polyrhythms, chordal structures, and a combination of all of these in a tour-de-force in the last one. It is quite the showpiece that is also quite enjoyable. *Where the Rivers Go* takes up where *Old and Lost Rivers* ended, but without the latter's sparse integrity and purity of line; this is a much more romantic re-visitation of those sentiments. ...when soft voices die... is also a romantic work in the earlier Picker style that is almost a tone poem in length. *The Blue Hula* is a real kicker, a couple-of-minutes rhythmic blockbuster that would make a great encore piece on any number of recitals. But the best thing here is his third piano concerto, *Keys to the City*, done here in a two-piano garb, with lots of hints of Gershwin, the brassiness and brashness of Broadway, and the flashiness of tux and tails. This work is meant to portray the Brooklyn Bridge in the context of the life of New York, and takes us on a whirlwind tour of all 24 keys, with 12-tone structure thrown in for good measure. It is truly Picker at his most alluring. **Ursula Oppens is the one you want with contemporary music, and her long association with the composer ensures credibility and phenomenal performances.** While I was not completely enthralled with everything on this disc, it is a keeper, and the great sound and excellent performances make it a winner in Wergo's stable. -- Steven Ritter

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