

Pianist Robert Cassidy plays Chopin, Feigin, and Debussy

## Pathways — Lessons Learned

Pianist Robert Cassidy's new solo piano CD *Pathways* - MSR Classics/MS1604/\$12.95/ [www.msrecd.com](http://www.msrecd.com) - takes the listener on an unexpectedly intriguing and intellectually satisfying musical journey. Matching seemingly disparate composers Chopin, Debussy, and Joel Feigin to reveal their mutual commonality, Cassidy has assembled a recording that should be in every serious classical music lover's collection. Debussy's Preludes Pour Piano, Livre II serves as the major work on the album, but it is American composer Joel Feigin's

DANIEL  
KEPL  
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*Four Elegies for Piano: In Memoriam Renée Longy* that connects the dots and enlightens on this CD. Feigin's moving homage to his ear-training teacher at Juilliard speaks to her unequivocal French character through implied colorations and tonal resting points that hint, not surprisingly, of Debussy. Cassidy misses none of this interconnectedness, further rewarding the listener with Chopin's super romantic, pre-impressionist *Barcarolle in F-Sharp Major, Op. 60*.

Robert Cassidy has been pianist for the Almeda Trio for six years, an ensemble in residence at The Music Settlement in Cleveland. He has recorded the piano works of American composers David Noon and Keith Fitch and has performed chamber music with members of the Cleveland Orchestra and dozens of other professional musicians throughout his career. Joining the faculty of Cleveland State University in 2008, Cassidy held the position of Lecturer of Applied Piano and Coordinator of Chamber Music, and taught Collaborative Piano and Accompanying from 2011-2014. Currently, Cassidy maintains a teaching studio at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, California. He recorded Debussy's *Préludes, Livre I* in 2012 (Albany Records/Troy 1348/\$16.99/ [www.albanyrecords.com](http://www.albanyrecords.com)).

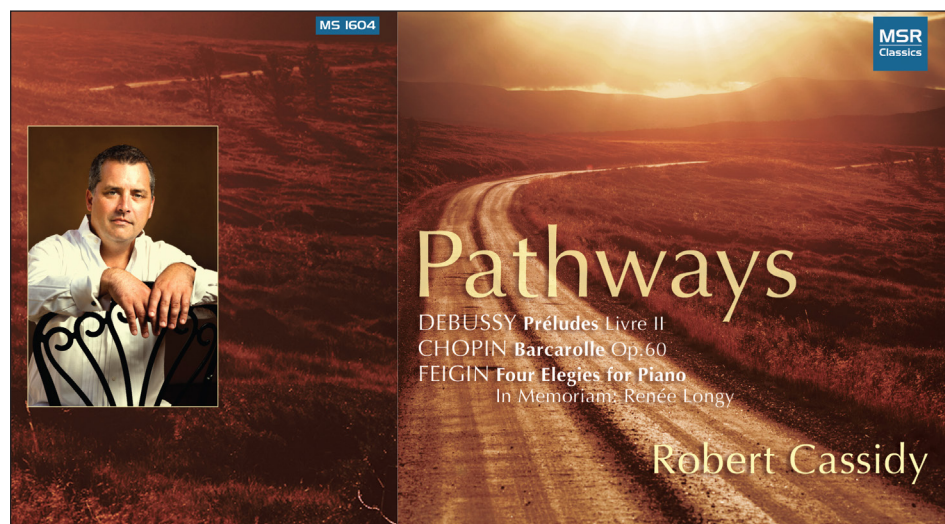
Tapping early roots that have shaped twentieth century romanticism, Dr. Cassidy opens his *Pathways* CD with a masterpiece of mid-nineteenth century imagery, Frédéric Chopin's *Barcarolle* in F-Sharp Major, Op. 60. It can be argued the heart of nineteenth century romanticism is 1845-1846, the years during which Chopin composed the *Barcarolle*. Robert and Clara Schumann, the young Brahms, Dostoevsky, Robert

Browning, Nathaniel Hawthorne et al were awash in the revolutionary idea circulating in the 1840s and 1850s that art might transform humanity's understanding of itself. Cassidy takes a leisurely, gondolier's pace with his interpretation, Chopin's episodic journey and subtle emotional prescience about things to come remarkably vivid and cleanly executed, especially in the powerful middle section. Cassidy employs a broad dynamic palate throughout this thoughtfully paced and eloquent performance.

Composer Joel Feigin has said that Zen practice is about being open to everything. "With that practice," he remarked in an interview recently, "whatever sounds I'm hearing in my head are much more easily accessible." Robert Cassidy's elegantly intuitive interpretation of the composer's magical *Four Elegies: In Memoriam Renée Longy*, testify to the pianist's deep understanding not only of contemporary repertoire, but reverie and meditation. Composed in 1979 and revised in 1986 the first, marked *Adagio molto rubato* begins tentatively, as if far away. It gathers itself from sound fragments and manifests, briefly. The result, performed with complete interpretive confidence by Cassidy, is a delicate hologram of Madame Longy, conjured from history's dust then allowed to dissipate again into quiet insubstantiality.

From its striking opening chord, the second, *Grave, quasi recitativo* is denser in structure. More aggressive at first, it settles into a mantra of sustained single notes and chord snippets; tonality mixes with atonality, bending the brain, but also satisfying the heart. Cassidy's narrative playing is gut perfect, reasoned, intelligent. The third *Andante con moto, molto rubato* is French in temperament, though the notion is tangential. There are sudden cascades of furious sound - Longy must have had strong opinions - but like rocks skipping across a still lake surface, the mood eventually becomes pointillist again, sounds drift away toward the far horizon. The fourth elegy, *Adagio molto* is the most Debussy-like of the series, particularly its transcendent last chord signaling release, ascension. Cassidy's interpretation is a jewel box filled with subtle colors and deep mysteries.

A masterstroke of programming acumen on Cassidy's part, the opening bars of *Brouillards* (Mists), the first of Debussy's 12 *Préludes Pour Piano, Livre*



*Il*, sound like a vague but fascinating stylistic pathway from Feigin's *Elegies* - or more correctly perhaps, vice versa. Composed in 1912-1913, *Livre II* is a delightful, technically difficult, precisely titled, and wildly imagined set of piano preludes that occasionally glimpse dark clouds ahead, but for the most part savor ante-bellum (WW I) Europe. Two Debussy's, the complex intellectual who despised the moniker "impressionist," and the lover of Dickens and fireworks, trade vivid musical anecdotes. Cassidy finds the ebb and flow of *Brouillards* and paces its imagery beautifully. Hahn Hall's excellent acoustics enhance an agile, sensitive performance of *Feuilles mortes* (Dead Leaves), while the composer's fascination with Spain's smoldering sensuality, Moorish modalities and rhythmic vitality is finessed energetically by Cassidy in the third prelude, *La Puerta del Vino* (The Gate of Wine).

*Les Fées sont d'exquises danseuses* (Fairies are Exquisite Dancers) - nice spacing and phrasing; *Bruyères* (Heather) - a lush and sensitive performance by Cassidy; the feisty cakewalk, *General Lavine* - eccentric, performed with coy relish; and *Hommage à S. Pickwick, Esq., sit confortably with La Terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* (Café sitters enjoy the moonlight) - sophisticated writing obliged with sensibility and poise by Cassidy; *Ondine* (Water-Sprite) - excellent use of pedal for

clarity as well as resonance; *Canope* (Funeral Urn) - played by Cassidy with care and reverence; *Les Tierces alternée* (Alternating Thirds) - a huge endurance and focus test in a lovely performance by the pianist; and finally the virtuoso last prelude, *Feux d'Artifice* (Fireworks) in an animated and richly colorful reading bring this marvelous recording of piano masterpieces to heady closure.

Liner notes by Clair W. Van Ausdall on Chopin and Debussy are a delight to read and shed wonderful light on their temperaments, while Joel Feigin's touching written memoir of his teacher, Renée Longy, helps the listener to connect, by the most rewarding if gossamer intellectual threads, the subtle pathways between these marvelous piano works from the early nineteenth, early twentieth, and late twentieth centuries. Recorded in Hahn Hall at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, producer Elaine Martone (Sonarc Music) and recording engineer Benjamin Maas (Fifth Circle Audio) have successfully captured the warm acoustic of the room.

Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor. He will conduct Emeriti Philharmonic during its tour of Cuba June 23 to July 8 2017. For more information visit [www.emeritiphilharmonic.com](http://www.emeritiphilharmonic.com)

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