

A Harmonious Collaboration

Review of

Brian Harnetty, *Words and Silences* [CD]

Columbus, OH: Winesap Records, 2022

22 tracks / \$12.00 (\$9.00 digital)

and

Brian Harnetty, *Words and Silences: From the Hermitage Tapes of Thomas Merton*

Columbus, OH: Winesap Records, 2022

47 pages / \$20.00 paper

Reviewed by **Julianne E. Wallace**

To know the man Thomas Merton, one must begin to immerse oneself in his own contemplative world. Merton enthusiasts and scholars often do this by exploring Merton's primary sources, for instance *The Seven Storey Mountain*, his journals and any other of his numerous publications. Merton also provided the world with a large number of photographs and drawings, in which one can appreciate Merton's keen artistic insight into the world. Finally, the various series of published recordings of Merton's conferences and taped reflections over the years provide an opportunity to sit down and listen to the very voice of Merton. Brian Harnetty's new project, *Words and Silences: From the Hermitage Tapes of Thomas Merton*, provides the world with a unique and novel variation on this last source of Merton material.

Harnetty, an interdisciplinary sound artist, is known for his creative integration of media, including words, music and sound. The goal in such a hybrid compilation of sounds is to foster a metanoia, or change in the listener. *Words and Silences*, which integrates Merton's voice and original musical compositions by Harnetty himself, fosters an opportunity for such a change in those who immerse themselves in the project. What results from this process is a "sonic portrait" of Merton. This portrait consists of a delightful conversation between Merton and the music, where both work together to help bring the listener into a deeper reflection of God in the world.

Harnetty creates this sonic portrait by first exploring archived recordings by Merton from 1967. These recordings, made at his hermitage, begin as an experiment. In the track entitled "Thinking

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Out Loud in the Hermitage,” the listener hears Merton’s own initial suspicion of this technology, specifically in how such a device can be effective in communicating the true, authentic self. But as each track progresses to the next, the listener witnesses Merton’s evolution in understanding the uses for the tape recorder. What begins as an experiment becomes a medium for meditations on peace, justice, music and more. Harnetty has skillfully chosen excerpts, from an undoubtedly large amount of available audio material, which perfectly encapsulate the humanity of Merton.

In addition to these recordings preserving the voice of Merton, the contexts of the hermitage has also been preserved. In the introductory track, “Sound of an Unperplexed Wren,” the listener hears several birds as they fly by, unknowing that their song was being recorded for posterity. In “Feast of Liberation” there is a subtle, almost eerie clock ticking away in the background, as Merton reflects on the Louisville race riots, which were happening at the time of the recording. To listen to these recordings is to be transported back in time. Harnetty has given the listener an opportunity to fully be present in the room with Merton, as he experiments with this new technology.

Merton’s voice and the sounds of the hermitage are but two of the contributors to this sonic portrait. While Merton may have been alone in his hermitage at the time of the recordings, he spends his time reflecting on voices of wisdom figures, philosophers and mystics that inspire and challenge Merton. In “Let There Be a Moving Mosaic of This Rich Material,” Merton reflects on Michel Foucault’s then recent publication *Madness and Civilization*. On this track, Merton and Foucault become conversation partners, with a lone piano musically knitting the conversation together. Harnetty balances the complexity of the conversation with a simple melody that draws the listener into the heart of the mosaic. Many of the other tracks feature the wisdom of Sufi mystics, jazz musicians and contemporary writers of Merton’s day; but there are also tracks that feature Merton’s own poetry and reflections, as if he is carrying on a conversation with himself.

While the skillfully selected archival recordings are a highlight of this project, Harnetty’s process of orchestration and production of the music is equally brilliant. When he began the project, Harnetty did not know what the finished product might be and as he continued to listen to the recordings he began to imagine a play, where the music and Merton exchange particular parts. Throughout the selected recordings, Harnetty observed Merton’s own improvisational style, commenting that at times, Merton seemed to be improvising an entire recorded selection. Inspired by this improvisational style, Harnetty began a process of creating orchestrations based on some of Merton’s favorite music. First he chooses a particular phrase from a larger piece, for example, “Boogie Woogie Prayer.” He then manipulates this phrase in a number of ways, by changing tempo, octave or rhythm. What results is an improvisation of word and music that is featured on the track “Breath, Water, Silence.” Harnetty uses this method for other tracks as well, using three notes from John Coltrane’s “Ascension” to accompany Merton’s voice during “Feast of Liberation.” The improvisation process is taken a step further with the actual performance of the orchestration. When sharing the composition with his group of four other musicians, Harnetty gave them a guide to follow and the musicians were invited to record several versions of each track, independent of the other instruments included in the ensemble. Once these tracks were completed, Harnetty wove all the tracks together, blending in Merton’s voice, to complete the sonic portrait. The result of this hybrid of media is a beautiful, soulful and at times complex conversation between Merton and the music, sometimes each speaking alone, sometimes both speaking together and sometimes inviting

others into the conversation.

Today, the tape recorder has become all but extinct, replaced first by compact discs and eventually by digital media. Harnetty, by harnessing the beauty of the grainy recordings, has given new life to these previously little-known words of Merton. By integrating his own musical orchestrations into Merton's recordings, Harnetty provides Merton scholars and enthusiasts alike with yet another way to enter into the mind of this contemplative.

Words and Silences contains 22 audio tracks, eleven tracks with Merton's voice and music and eleven instrumental tracks that highlight the musical compositions alone. In addition, there is an accompanying booklet that contains Harnetty's essay on the project along with transcriptions of the recordings. *Words and Silences* is published by Winesap Records and is available via Bandcamp in both streaming and downloaded versions, as well as on CD with accompanying printed text. More information and instructions for downloading are available at www.brianharnetty.com.