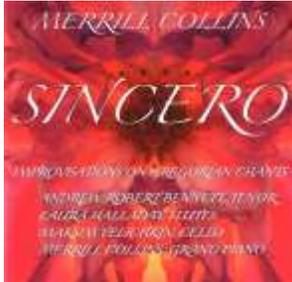


Merrill Collins
Sincero

Sincere



When faith and love come together, walls crumpled, rivers are crossed, and challenges are overcome. Such is the concept behind Nazareth House; a faith-based community center in Los Angeles and repeating that notion is the music in the album **Sincero** by **Merrill Collins** and friends. The album is nine tracks of inspired early Gregorian chant and contemporary religious music featuring pianist Merrill Collins and accompanied by tenor **Andrew Robert Bennett**, flutist **Laura Halladay**, and cellist **Maksim Velichkin**. Collectively the music is reminiscent of Vespers, or perhaps the meditative background conducive to reading Thomas Merton. Bennett sings a capella in the songs, but the music itself is contemplative when cello, flute, and piano combine. By the way, when I write contemporary, read “in the last three hundred years”. Most of the tracks open with a mind-clearing gong.

Bennett’s pear-shaped tones and amazing clarity are evident in the opening tune **Veni, Creator Spiritus** or Welcome, Spirit of the Creator. Flute, cello, and Collins’ Grand piano coalesces into a gentle, peaceful song which literally, sets the tone for the recording.

Merrill Collins is a well-known pianist and founder of Spiraling Music. She uses music as others use oxygen. She lives and breathes her music and has done so for several decades. She has multiple degrees in music with a Master's of Music Degree from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She also produces, composes, and publishes music, with one hundred forty one tracks available on iTunes and other platforms.

Jesus Dulcis Memoria (Memory of Jesus Sweet) opens with a flutter of instruments, but solidifies when Bennett comes to task. The hymn is from a poem penned by Saint Bernard.

*“Among all songs, no sweeter one,
Brief life is here our portion,
Dear Jesus when I think on thee.”*

The music has an overall extemporization feel, but every song stands on its own as a spiritual homage.

Regina Caeli (Be Joyful Mary) is not a well-known hymn, and yet Collins and company turn it into a humble paean to the Holy Mother for a modern time. The song centers on the death of Jesus Christ and Mary being sorrowful. But the hymn urges her to take heart

and be joyful, for He will rise. The music is warm and lyrical with the strong voice of Halladay's flute.

Laura Halladay is an in-demand flutist and tours with the MESTO Orchestra, but I remember her from the *Angels of Venice* eponymous original release. Her contributions to this present work are sensible and welcomed. Her melodic flute sings gently in each song as a voice of reverence.

On the universal chant **Ubi Caritas** (Live in Charity), Bennett's voice is strong and his enunciation perfect. The hymn is a calling together of all to live in peace and praise the name of God. If Bennett's voice is the question, then the music of Collins, Halladay, and Velichkin is an answer. One of the lines of the hymn says, "In our darkness, kindle a fire," and they do. Maksim Velichkin's cello is a meandering, mature voice on the recording.

Maksim Velichkin repertoire and experience as a cellist is extensive. Recording his associations would fill up a pamphlet. Let me just say he is a world traveler and performer. He is also known as a musician on harpsichord and piano.

A single note from Collins' piano begins **Conditor Alme Siderum** (Creator of the Stars at Night), one of my favorites in *Sincero*. It is balanced well by every member of the quartet almost as if everyone takes a turn and then comes together in a humble blessing in the end. The music blends incredibly well with the sentiment of "Everlasting Light".

Andrew Robert Bennett sings in Latin the line, "*Come, Holy Spirit, from heaven shine forth,*" on the final track called **Veni Sancte Spiritus** or Come To Us Holy Spirit. The music is predominantly a duet with Collins' piano and Velichkin's cello presiding, but Halladay's flute joins in moderately. The tune itself is blissful in a meditative way. You can easily get lost in this and every tune on *Sincero*. Even though there is some talk about these tunes being improvisational, every tune is solid in its composition and there is an emotional and reverent flow to these calming canticles.