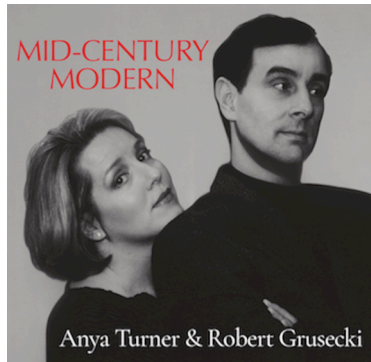


Anya Turner and Robert Grusecki's "Mid-Century Modern"

Bistro Awards – Lisa Jo Sagolla

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An appealing new studio recording of ten original songs co-written and performed by vocalist **Anya Turner** and pianist **Robert Grusecki**, *Mid-Century Modern* is pleasingly unified by the prettiness, warmth, and intimacy of all of its selections. Within its line-up of impressively-devised songs, it also offers entertaining stylistic variety. Delivered in simple, voice-and-piano arrangements—with Turner doing most of the singing and Grusecki supplying ravishing keyboard accompaniment and occasional vocal harmonizing or duet work—the memorable songs are striking in how organically connected the words and music feel. One isn't aware of sets of lyrics being set to melodies, but rather of tunes arising naturally from the inherent musicality of the language.



This quality is evident from the get-go, as the uptempo opening track, "Mid-Century Modern," recalls the jazzy, close-harmonies of Manhattan Transfer in an enjoyably wordy, swing number. Showcasing Turner's clear, clipped diction, it sets the title words to a punchy series of ascending notes that correlates so indelibly—and is such fun to sing—that I doubt I'll ever be able to utter that arty term otherwise.

Suddenly shifting into the slow, dreamy gear that characterizes much of the album, the next song, "Small Town," is so aesthetically irresistible—Turner's heavenly singing and Grusecki's gorgeous piano playing—that its idyllic descriptions of the everyday activities of small-town life prove almost convincing. Almost. We're told that in a small town "it's okay not to question why," which, as far as I'm concerned, is what makes for a "small"

life.

But it's the album's third selection, "The Sound of My Voice," that really resonated with me on a deeply personal level. It's an enticing pop song, urging a surrender to the comforting, protective feelings embodied in the sound of a lover's voice. As its gently "pushing" rhythms support the persuading mission of its lyrics, I'm reminded that the soothing tones of my late soul-mate's voice were what I, indeed, cherished above all else.

Then, in the intriguing duet "Our Little Secret," the couple sings of how competently they hide their discontents from the rest of the world—and perhaps each other. Their biting words are sung to oh-so-pretty piano music, suggesting how easily people mask their distresses with pleasantness.

The album's central four tracks are stellar and range from a Latin-flavored ballad to a country waltz, a Broadway-style comedy piece, and a powerful torch song. Inflected with easy Latin rhythms, "Piñata" describes the reaching for, hitting, and bursting of a candy-filled piñata as a metaphor for the dreaming, striving, and achieving of one's deepest desires. Ingeniously, the catchy setting of the phrase "you whirl, and dance, and sway as you reach for the piñata," evokes the cited physical actions as well as the intense yearning behind them, while sparkling sounds from the piano call to mind the prop's alluring ornamentation.

With its straightforward lyrics about a mature couple's evolved feelings for one another, "I Love You, Still" feels blatantly auto-biographical. Turner and Grusecki are a married couple, and here they tell us: "We both had to sort out one hell of a past, before reaching the heavens above, so we tussled and tangled and squabbled and fought, and finally landed in love"—sung in old-fashioned waltz time, it's affectingly honest.

Pivoting into a satiric vein for "Weird Little Club," which sounds like a Sondheim-inspired show tune, the duo skewers the snobbery and exclusiveness they associate with clubs and cliques. The result is wonderfully offbeat, and works well as a lead-in to "Insanity," a dark, torchy lament exploring the road from unrequited love to loss of sanity. A great showpiece for Turner's expressive vocals, it feels like a standard, the kind of song that, had it been written 70 years ago, would be part of the Songbook.

The recording closes with "Can't Get There From Here," a toe-tapping trip back to the earliest days of rock 'n' roll, followed by the tear-jerking "One Last Time," an aching anthem for a couple coming to the end of their time together. I, too, was sad to come to the end of this album. Its quick, 37 minutes of first-rate songwriting and interpretation proved thoroughly delightful.