



Yo-Yo Ma's latest album is a mix of beautiful and bland  
LARRY FRENCH/GETTY IMAGES

ALBUM REVIEW

# Yo-Yo Ma/Kathryn Stott: Songs of Comfort and Hope — heartfelt, but smothering

Also reviewed: *Regards sur l'infinie* by Katharine Dain/Sam Armstrong

Geoff Brown

Wednesday December 09 2020, 12.01am, The Times

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**Yo-Yo Ma/Kathryn Stott**  
Songs of Comfort and Hope

★★☆☆☆

**Katharine Dain/Sam Armstrong**  
*Regards sur l'infinie*

★★★★☆

Of all the benefits of being vaccinated, stopping the stream of classical artists' Age of Coronavirus albums might not come near the top of most people's list. There are days, however, when it looms large on mine. I'm not thinking of those courageous recording projects executed under lockdown conditions, such as the Philip Glass Ensemble's stunning home delivery of Glass's little-known *Music in Eight Parts*. It's rather those celebrity-driven collections of soothing bits and pieces, kindly meant, but with musical and emotional satisfaction very difficult to arrange, yet alone guarantee.

Take [Yo-Yo Ma](#)'s entry into this testing field, *Songs of Comfort and Hope*, a collection curated by his piano partner on this album, Kathryn Stott. All would be well if their music-making remained as strong and beautiful as it is in their Mendelssohn *Song Without Words* or the extract from Bloch's *Jewish Life*. Yet such jewels quickly become smothered by fussily arranged folk material (*Shenandoah*), too much diversity (from a Zulu lullaby to Vera Lynn's hit *We'll Meet Again*) and what I can only describe as the musical equivalent of limp celery. Ma plays with his heart in every track; even so, I'd advise seeking comfort and joy elsewhere.

You could try gazing into infinity with Katharine Dain, an American soprano with scorching top notes, based in the Netherlands, and the incisive British pianist Sam Armstrong. As a virus album, *Regards sur l'infinie* is impressively elegant and thoughtful, featuring cunningly chosen French song settings presented in palindrome form. At the centre is Messiaen's ecstatic cycle exploring human and divine love, *Poèmes pour Mi*, sandwiched between related slices from composers in Messiaen's orbit, from his first wife, Claire Delbos, to modern French music's fountainhead, Debussy.

The sound balance tends to favour Armstrong’s piano, marvellous in itself, while Dain lower down her vocal register can’t match the glory of Dain higher up. Yet such quirks are easily offset by the musicians’ penetrating artistry; by the thrill of their repertoire too. It’s almost worth buying this album just for the opening and closing songs by Kaija Saariaho: perfect in every way. (*Sony Classical/7 Mountain Records*)

Music

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John Michael Hollas 11 DECEMBER

A similar, but worse, criticism applies to an awful Jonas Kaufmann CD, each song being played on a different day on Classic FM. They are rather untunefully sung and in a way which is often the case when opera/lieder singers sing more popular material. Couldn't wait for each song to finish and felt sorry for Alexander Armstrong having to make comments after each song. Please, Jonas, don't do it again.

J

Jasper H 9 DECEMBER Edited

Report

A very subjective review. De gustibus....

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