Jonathan Miller, the intrepid artistic director of Chicago A Cappella, is clearly dedicated to African-American spirituals, musically as well as culturally and historically. This is apparent from his well-researched liner notes, as well as from the collection of new arrangements he has meticulously assembled and lovingly recorded here. Ten of these seventeen pieces are world premiere recordings, including five that were commissioned by the group. The collection ranges from lively and upbeat but fairly straightforward treatments, like the opening “I Wanna Be Ready” (arranged by Moses Hogan), to the relentlessly imaginative re-composition of “This Train” by Gwyneth Walker, which builds train sound effects into the texture and is full of serendipitous moments right up until the end. “Hear de lambs a-cryin’,” moves slowly but probingly in Paul Carey’s subtle arrangement, with the harmonies growing gratifyingly richer toward the end. Paul Crabtree’s treatment of “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?” has an infectiously perky groove and creative rhythmic playfulness. Rollo Dilworth interpolates some scrumptious chords into his take on the little-known but very catchy “Sistah Mary.” Dilworth is also responsible for the rollicking, standout adaptation of “Roll, Jordan, Roll!”, which expertly plays the different sections of the chorus off each other, and provides vibrant harmonies when the texture settles. The sinuous, gospel-flavored “Save Me, Lord” is an original composition by Robert L. Morris, who did choral arrangements for Duke Ellington, and features a soulful solo by Cari Plachy, who extends with great flexibility into her upper register. Miller himself contributed “Daniel, Moses, Joshua,” which is a skillful amalgam of “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,” “Go Down Moses,” and “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho” that must’ve been great fun to puzzle out compositionally. Each of the nine group members is featured as soloist at least once; all show spirit, commitment, and good musicianship, if not perfect stylistic affinity. Collectively the group is clearly jazzed by the music and treats these beautifully crafted arrangements as the works of art they are. In fact, one wishes at times they would cut loose a little more — sacrifice some of their polish and refinement in service of the raw, visceral emotion that is at the root of the spiritual tradition. Not all of the tracks are as absorbing as the ones singled out here, and intonation isn’t always perfect, but there’s a good deal here that is well worth hearing and sticks pleasingly in the mind afterward.

JOSHUA ROSENBLUM