

An American Sampler - New Music from NACUSA
E.R.M. 6662

NACUSA, the National Association of Composers, USA, has been helping to promote the careers of American composers and conductors since its founding in 1933. This CD, which the organization helped in part to fund, presents the work of seven of its members.

Robert Carl's "Liberty" for two pianos and percussion will initially, and no doubt intentionally, bring to mind Bartok's piece for similar ensemble. However Mr. Carl's sense of differences -- dynamic, timbral, and melodic -- create a dramatic surface, and story, which unfolds in a rather un-Bartokian way. Carl's jagged, jangly, jarring crescendi can abruptly turn into delicate ditties; the rhythmic unisons between piano(s) and percussion(ists) are especially riveting, resulting in serendipitous-sounding chords that are sweet, crunchy, and copious, all piling up to the final surprise of a little popsongy riff which repeats, then fades off into a nursery's music box. But, oh, there's that ominously perfect last note!

Stefania de Kenessey has been associated with the revival of "melodic, accessible, contemporary music" (as the liner notes state) for a number of years now. To those familiar with her work, her "Sunburst", beautifully played by pianist Barbara Mort, will be a welcome addition to the repertoire; to those unfamiliar, some rethinking of where and what new music is will inevitably follow. Ms. de Kenessey's Romantic flourishes and pianistic filigree, sonata-form architecture complete with repeated exposition and coda, may actually confuse some modern ears. The nostalgia is merely patina, however; underneath, behind, and beside it all are two gorgeous melodies, completely satisfying, and completely memorable: I had them both in my head for days after. And to this modern ear, that is an all too rare, but all very welcome turn of events.

Jennifer Higdon's ambitious eighteen and a half minute "Voices" for string quartet, is marred by the sound of page turns and hacking coughers. The presence of the latter do, interestingly enough, make us attentive to the "live" aspects of the performance, and in that garner a deserved admiration for the Windham String Quartet; this is no easy piece to play. There's plenty to listen to and for, but, by and large, as we move from sound mass to sound mass, one gets the feeling the harmonics and sul ponticellos, tremoli and glissandi are obligatory. The solo lines are well crafted but unspecial; however, one can't help but admire the skill with which she gets us from the turbulent first movement ("Blitz") to the lyrical, sumptuous third ("Grace").

Charles Dvorak's "Seven Bagatelles for Piano" are exquisitely played by Leonid Gelfgat; these are small, delicate, complete sound worlds yet glimpsed as if from a moving window, and Gelfgat masterfully guides us into, and through, each one. Dvorak appears to have created his own harmonic vocabulary out of (one guesses) his favorite keyboard music: Schoenberg, Chopin, Bach ... and the result is poignant, reflective and original. Melodies can twist and turn (#1-3), dissolve into color (#6), make you smile (#4, #5), or cry (#7); very often the sense is the music is getting at something just around the corner; we may hear it, we may not, but in all cases Mr. Dvorak is letting us in on something very private and special.

Nancy Bloomer Deussen is listed here as “a leader in the movement for more melodic, tonally oriented contemporary music.” Her “Trio”, in three movements (fast, slow, fast) for piano, clarinet, and violin, is a nicely presented and simply served confection; that it makes little demand on the listener is one of its assets, having little (if anything) to do with its being tonal, and having everything to do with the character and exposition of its melodic material. Deussen’s abundant use of doubling between violin and clarinet keeps the texture transparent and uncomplicated; it’s more effective in the first movement (which has the more likeable tune) than the third, where it begins to wear a little thin. Unlike some of her other music, one misses here the emotional depth that would elevate the piece from the merely charming and pretty. Still, there’s plenty of Mozart that falls into this category too, and so-called “advanced” composers can learn something from Ms. Deussen’s heart-on-the-sleeve tunesmithing.

Richard Nanes’ plays his own pellucid and captivating three and a half minute “Sonnet #9 in G Major” for piano. Part of the captivation is in the title, which, once we’ve heard the first 8 measures or so, we realize is meant to express a particular slant on G major, functional harmony, and any other baggage one might bring to bear on a piece which announces itself as being “in” some key. Rather, Mr. Nanes presents a four-note motive, and then, as if meditating on it, expands and echoes it through varyingly resonant sound masses -- ok, chords, if you will -- which seem to circle G major but never close in on it for certain. Needless to say, the harmonic material is complex and rich, and likely to produce exclamations of “very interesting” or “very clever” at the end of most phrases.

Last is Jeremy Beck’s “Never Final Never Gone”, a short (just over two minutes) piece for chorus and piano. The piece sounds frustratingly muddy, and it’s difficult to know whether it’s a poor recording (is this a live recording?) an under-rehearsed University of Northern Iowa chorus, or, god-forbid, the composer’s fault. From what I can make out, it is unlikely the latter: the work has a certain poetry -- the piano accompaniment seems sensitively wrought, especially its entrances. And I truly loved the piano music which ends the piece. The words could not be made out clearly, and it would have helped to have provided the text. And the source. For that matter, I wish all the composers had provided notes about their pieces (dates of composition are also omitted) rather than the usual list of teachers, schools, awards, etc. I wish Mr. Beck lots of recordings in the future, and another “Never Final Never Gone” real soon.