

Two By Three

North/South Recordings 1015

Music by Stefania de Kenessey, Nancy Bloomer Deussen and Beth Anderson

Music theorist Joseph Dubiel once cannily observed that two composers who might otherwise seem ideologically opposed may in fact be right next to each other on the compositional spectrum. How? By the mere fact that they both take seriously the issues about which they so heatedly disagree.

The three composers on this disk – Stefania de Kenessey, Nancy Bloomer Deussen, and Beth Anderson, would appear to occupy adjacent seats on the relatively larger – yet still relatively microscopic – dais of concert music, if only by what they so clearly eschew: in a word, atonality. Yet the dissimilarities are refreshingly apparent from these selections, putting to rest, one would hope, the notion that “tonally-oriented” music is somehow a province unto itself. The disk offers two pieces from each composer (hence the CD’s title) played extremely well and with obvious conviction by pianist Mary Kathleen Ernst, violinist Teri Lazar, and cellist Marcio Botelho.

Nancy Bloomer Deussen often walks a musical tightrope between what she calls the “highly accessible” and what others may call facile. Highly accessible should mean comprehensible, but not necessarily familiar. Her pouring of material into what often appear to be pre-fab molds – of both form and gesture -- does indeed make her music accessible, but also, alas, sometimes too predictable. Her TWO PIECES FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO, is an example of Ms. Deussen’s sophisticated handling of harmonic material, material which stays faithfully on course. One wishes, given her obvious skill at what she’s doing, to take a side road, or just pull over to enjoy the scenery. Her TRIO for violin, cello, and piano – the better of the two pieces -- is a triptych which, like her other music, displays Ms. Deussen’s fondness for rhythmic unison and doubling. The problem here is color: her instruments tend to gather in the same registers, the effect of which makes her tunes, which are otherwise well-wrought and fetching, appear tired out. Her particular way of doing things does give her music personality; it’s just that she does them twice too often, and the more active (or, restless) listener begins urging her to try something a little different.

Stefania de Kenessey has earned a reputation for music that is tonal in the most literal and historical sense; those timid around any tonal music written after 1870 won’t object to her use of functional harmony so much as to her impudent use, say, of sonata form, or constructing filigree passages from arpeggios and scale runs, as evidenced here in Mary Kathleen Ernst’s performance of SUNBURTS. What makes this piece and the more folklike BEATING DOWN (for piano, violin and cello) work so well is that deKenessey is able to control tonality and its baggage in a way which creates an ongoing mystery about what’s going to happen next. And the next that happens is usually an unpredictable, delightful surprise. Repetitions of rhythmic and melodic contour, for example, especially in BEATING DOWN, occur in the least expected ways, passed between instruments or across registers, insistent yet pliable. And her melodies (as I’ve said before in another review of her music for these pages) stay in my head for days. How often does that happen to you?

For Beth Anderson musical form reveals itself almost after the fact. In TRIO:DREAM IN d, and NETWORK, the listener’s sense is that of overhearing private improvisation, the next-door neighbor whose piano you don’t mind waking you up in the middle of the night. TRIO: Dream in d, like memory, combines the bittersweet and grotesque, but without nostalgia or sentimentality. Gestures tend to get large, intentionally too much so for such innocent material. This heavy-handedness is, of course, part of the charm, if we can believe in crafted naivete. NETWORK is a fetching little tune followed by, well, not

variations exactly, but a sequence of different imaginings, each in her idiosyncratic, where'd-that-come-from way: modulations (sort-of), extra beats, accents, figures dropping in and out of the sky. Yet make no mistake: this is not a pot-luck affair. It's all very much of a piece, and one that is unmistakably hers and hers alone.