

DELLARIA *The Stranger, Grief*.¹ *USA Stories*.² *3 Rivers*.³ *This World is not Conclusion*.⁴ *Colored Stones*.⁵ • Joel Eric Suben, cond;^{1,3,4} Slovak RO;^{1,3,4} Mark Shapiro, cond;^{2,4} Cantori New York;^{2,4} Rannveig Braga (mez);¹ Chris Pedro Trakas (bar);⁵ Jennifer Peterson (pn)⁵ • ALBANY TROY 487 (60:08 □)

Michael Dellaria is a composer who pursued a very “proper” composer’s education, which included advanced degrees at Princeton, studies with Milton Babbitt (among others), and an immersion in serial practice. However, like many of his generation and background, he came to question the values of this aesthetic, and ultimately re-embraced the music that initially brought him into the field—popular and tonal.

Dellaria shows a special proclivity and talent for vocal music. Composers such as Bernstein, Rorem, and Glass all seem to be influences, mixed in a way that does not seem easily imitative or derivative. In fact, each of the four vocal works displays an inventive and personal approach to a very different vocal genre and/or challenge. *The Stranger, Grief* is a concert aria adapted from the composer’s opera *Chéri* (libretto by Susan Yankowitz), and moves into a dreamy realm that depicts fading love with a waltz-like lilt. *Colored Stones* is an elegant song cycle on poems of Richard Howard, distinguished by memorable motives structuring each of its ten movements. *This World Is Not Conclusion* sets four Emily Dickinson poems for chorus and orchestra, and creates the recital’s fullest sound and most consciously noble rhetoric, albeit a bit more conservative in its language (though ironically, many of its harmonic progressions come straight out of rock music). *USA Stories* is an a cappella choral piece that takes texts from John Dos Passos’s masterwork, and it is ingenious in the way it sets chunks of prose that in their length, flatness, and relative complexity would seem to defy setting. Yet, Dellaria succeeds, in part by using minimalist techniques to create rich and engaging textures that carry the music through the forest of words. The (often canonic and hocketing) counterpoint creates textures that are often tricky and insinuating. This piece seems the most inventive and original of all those presented in this disc.

The only piece of this collection that does not move me is the orchestral piece *Three Rivers*. This work uses the same postminimal/tonal techniques as the vocal works, but in a purely instrumental context; it seems somewhat thin to my ear. The notes say that the work, from 1995, was a turning point for the composer in his stylistic odyssey, and I can believe that it is consequently very important for his subsequent work. But that does not mean that its gestures can sustain the weight of the rhetoric they are asked to bear.

Performances range from satisfactory (the Slovak Radio Orchestra) to excellent (Chris Pedro Trakas and Mark Shapiro’s Cantori New York). The sonic quality is fine throughout. It would be nice to know the dates of the vocal works, since only that of the orchestral piece is mentioned. Dellaria strikes me, based on this disc, as above all a composer with a personal and substantive take on choral writing.

Robert Carl

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