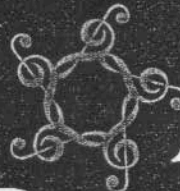


July/August 2004

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American Record Guide

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Overview:
Sergei Prokofieff

The Newest Music

STAUD: *A Map is Not the Territory; Bewungen; Polygon; Black Moon; Berenice; Lied vom Ver-schwinden*,

Marino Formenti, Thomas Larcher, p; Ernesto Molinari, bcl; Petra Hoffman, s; Klangforum Wien, Vienna Radio Symphony/ Sylvain Cambreling, Bertrand de Billy, Emilio Pomarico Kairos 1239—62 minutes

SMITH: *Grand Oak Trees at Dawn; Quartets 1+3; Barsdale*

Dorothy Stone, fl; Agnes Gottschwenski, Christine Frank, v; Jan Karlin, va; Maggie Edmondson, vc; Stuart Fox, g—Cambria 8809—53 minutes

Society of Composers 19: Comucopia

Works by Lansing McLoskey, Jason Haney, Mark Applebaum, D'Arcy Reynolds, Sabang Cho, Robert Paterson

Earneest Barry III, Christopher Lee, perc; Helen Bledsoe, Margaret Brydges, fl; Tasha Dzubay, cl; Amy Schendel, tpt; Kyo-Jin Lee, hp; Mischa Zupka, p, celeste; D'Arcy Reynolds, Diane Birr, Timothy Bozarth, p; Albert Wu, I-Ching Li, v; Chris McKay, Igor Veligan, va; Yoon-Hae Kim, Mickey Katz, vc; Sarah Hogan, db; Lee Goodhew, bn; Indiana University Vocal Ensemble/ Carmen Tellez, Debra Shearer—Capstone 8725—61 min

HASS: *Piano Concerto; Keyed Up; Lost in the Fun-house; Fantasy; City Life*

Paul Barnes, Ann Change-Barnes, p; Lina Bahn, v; Indiana University Wind Ensemble, Indiana University New Music Ensemble/ Ray Cramer, Akira Mori

Indiana University 12—69 minutes

HISCOTT: *Blue Ocean; Quartets 1+2; Swirl; Waves of Passion*

Molinari Quartet; Paul Marleyn, vc; Judith Keller-Siebert, p; Lori Freedman, bcl; Eric Hansen, db; Jim Hiscott, accordion

CBC 1166—77 minutes

PROTO: *Ghost in the Machine episodes; Creatures in Room 642; 4 Rogues; Lessons*

Jessica Walter, narr; Marie Speziale, tpt; Christopher Philpotts, ob, eng hn; Michael Chertock, p; William Platt, perc; Frank Proto, db
Red Mark 9222—67 minutes (2832 Spring Grove Ave, Cincinnati, OH 45225)

HERSCH: *Recordatio; 2 Pieces; After Hölderlin's Hälfte des Lebens; Octet*

Michael Hersch, p; Matthew Hunter, va; David Riniker, vc; Berlin Philharmonic String Soloists Vanguard 1240—68 minutes

Trio

by Tom Erbe, Chris Mann, Larry Polansky, Douglas Repetto, Christian Wolff

Tom Erbe, processing; Chris Mann, voice; Larry Polansky, g; Douglas Repetto, computer, electronics; Christian Wolff, p, db, perc, melodica
Pogus 21031—55 minutes (50 Ayr Road, Chester, NY 10918)

JOHNSON: *Symphonies 2+5*

Lee Johnson, p, keyboards; Felecia Sorenson, voice, Jack Gallup, g; Sam Skelton, winds; Ben Zion Brohnstein, narr; London Symphony, London Metro Voices, Atlanta Schola Cantorum, Young Singer of LaGrange/ Lee Johnson
CCnC 2432—66 minutes

BIGGS: *Symphonies 1+2; Ballad of William Sycamore*

Jonathan Dun-Rankin, narr; Czech National Symphony/ Paul Freeman—Albany 635—66 min

SCHWARTZ: *Voyager; Mehitabel's Serenade; Jack O' Lantern; Celebrations/Reflections: Time Warp; Timepiece 1794*

Kenneth Radnofsky, sax; Moravian Philharmonic, New England Conservatory Honors Orchestra, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, Slovak Radio Orchestra/ Toshiyuki Shimada, Richard Hoenich, Edwin London, Szymon Kawalla
Albany 646—75 minutes

MAGGIO: *Aristotle; Wishing Tree; Jacklight; Rachel & Her Children—Small Hands Relinquish All*

Kirsten Gwynn, Katherine Gentry, s; Suzanne due Plantis, mz; Adam Hollander, Stephanie Wilson, ob; Charles Salinger, Arne Running, cl; Jon Gaarder, Leonard Bass, bn; Paul LaFollette, Paul Rosenberg, Karen McCommon, Patricia Schwein-gruber hn; Robert Skoniczin, Thomas Cook, tpt, Paul Bryan, Anthony Wise, Jonathan Schubert, trb; West Chester University Concert Choir, Chamber Singers of Haverford & Bryn Mawr Colleges, Bucks County Choral Society, Pennsylvania Young Chorale/ David P DeVenney, Thomas Lloyd, Eileen Finley—Albany 645—68 minutes

LARSON: *Margaret Songs; Duet from Eric Her-mannson's Soul; Beloved, Thou Hast Brought Me Many Flowers; Changing To Paradise; Color Duet; Hell's Belles; Duet from Mrs Dalloway; Calamity Jane to her Daughter Janey*

Terry Rhodes, s; Ellen Williams, mz; Benton Hess, p; Steven Reis, vc; Raleigh Ringers/ David Harris
Albany 634—72 minutes

ADAMS: *12 Etudes*

Maria Corley, p—Albany 639—70 minutes

MARCEL: *City of Angels; BOUDREAU: Planets*

Louis-Philippe Pelletier, p
Centrediscs 9503—74 minutes

RADULESCU: *Lao Tzu Sonatas 2, 3, 4*

Ostwin Stürmer, p—CPO 999880—56 minutes

How helpful are style labels for reviewing the newest music of the 21st Century? Whether their music is good or bad, original or derivative, polished or clumsy, subtle or banal, composers need not abide by the convenient style categories that musicologists make up. This is particularly true now. In the last ten years, because of the personal computer and the internet, the ability to produce, publish, and sell audio discs has come within reach of almost any composer or performer. Composers and performers are no longer beholden to the priorities of corporate record labels, music publishers, academic institutions, non-profit organizations, or government grants to make their music available to the public—and to ARG reviewers. Therefore, the styles of much of the New Music now available are neither trendy nor standbys proven in the marketplace. Nor are the styles always groundbreaking or intellectually important.

Much of the 21st Century New Music I am asked to review seems to bypass the "isms" of the 20th Century. It does usually relate to 20th Century repertoire in some way, often indirectly or even unintentionally. In fact, it often helps to compare today's New Music directly to 20th Century repertoire, rather than to the style labels for that repertoire. As in the past, I try to use the familiar style labels (the "isms") where they may help to orient the reader. Nearly every familiar style label applies to the current batch of discs.

This batch mostly disappoints me. Few compare favorably to the best I have reviewed recently. (Look at the final page of my column in the last issue, where the four best releases of that batch were reviewed.) But there are four bright spots this time: three piano sonatas by Horatio Radulescu of Romania; two lengthy piano cycles by Walter Boudreau and Luc Marcel of Quebec; orchestral and solo works by Johannes Maria Staud of Austria—a spring chicken at only 30 years old; and chamber and solo works by Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith, a jazz trumpeter and member of Chicago's jazz-oriented AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) who now teaches at CalArts in San Francisco. Nine of the discs in the current batch combine solo, orchestral, and chamber music; I'll consider them first. Then there are two purely orchestral releases, two of vocal music, and three of piano.

If you thought post-serial modernism from Europe could only sound stale in this day and age, young Austrian composer Johannes Maria Staud proves you wrong. *A Map is not the Territory*, the largest work on his debut disc, bursts forth in rich, taut, arresting, ferocious sonic images. Its timbral richness compares to Boulez's; its rhythmic athleticism compares to Carter's. Yet, in the spirit of Varese and Birtwistle, there's also a vigorous muscularity—the lower brass and percussion are not shy.

I particularly appreciate that Staud's music avoids rhetorical clichés; it's not predictable. All three orchestral works reveal a vivid imagination for sound, color, rhythm, and gesture. These are subtly controlled. The bone-crunching atonal surface of Staud's music works in the service of a suave but visceral neoexpressionism, comparable to, but less theatrical and post-modern than Wolfgang Rihm's. If you do not dislike atonal modernism, I recommend Staud.

Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith is almost old enough to be Staud's grandfather. Yet his music is not well known—and it should be. These works betray no obvious stylistic influences, though they never seem like they're trying to sound new. They are mostly atonal, though they don't avoid allusions to tonal, often jazzy, harmonies. The textures and moment-to-moment continuity of the works are easy to follow but never sound hackneyed. Is Smith's music "modernist"? Perhaps, but in a rather laid-back, West Coast sort of way.

Smith composed the earliest work here, the First Quartet, in 1969 (revising it in 1980) and the most recent work, *Barsdale*, for guitar, in 1998. The First Quartet is episodic and spacious. Yet it's fraught with scratchy ponticellos and soaring glissandos akin to Roger Reynolds's quartet *Coconino...a Shattered Landscape* (1985). The pitch and gestural language of Smith's quartets could be compared to Webern or Bartok, but they are paced more leisurely. *Barsdale* sounds perfect for the guitar, never forced onto it like some contemporary guitar music. It languidly tells its own private story of introspective chords—the guitar equivalent to Bill Evans's atmospheric jazz piano playing. I should mention one predictable element to Smith's music in general: pair-wise repetition; as one might do to give short-term coherence to a free improvisation, Smith often echoes a melodic idea once or twice before moving on to the next. Nevertheless, he has a gift for evoking and maintaining a mood through his music. The mood is unfamiliar, but very comfortable.

The newest installment, No. 19, from the Society of Composers is, as usual, a mixed bag. Most of all I enjoy the novel sound of Lansing McLoskey's *Break, Blow, Burn*: something like

Varese's *Nocturnal* meets Stephen Hartke's *Tituli*; rhythmic percussion accompanies a chorus singing quartal harmonies. Its suggestive text combines writings of the 17th Century "bad-boy" John Donne with Psalm 54. Jason Haney's *An die Musik*, a short cantata for soprano and chamber ensemble, is well done and quite enjoyable, but doesn't distinguish itself from many modernist cantatas of the 20th Century, such as ones by Boulez and Berio. Boulez- and Ferneyhough-like atonal flute fluttering fills Applebaum's *Entre Funerailles*. Reynolds's Five Preludes for viola and piano are in the style of Debussy's three late sonatas; Cho's *Aqua* drapes lyrical atonal gestures over Debussy-like harmonies; Pearson's Bassoon Sonata is a pleasant and accessible synthesis of melodies based on the octatonic scale, romantic harmonies, and sunny post-minimalist rhythms. This is recommended only to collectors of the Society of Composers series and if you are curious about McLoskey's *Break, Blow, Burn*.

Though its sound is polished, there's nothing particularly striking or entrancing to recommend on Jeffrey Hass's new disc. I find much of it formulaic, cliched, simplistic, and even bombastic. Fans of Schwantner's and Rouse's recent music, or even the peppy rhythmic drive of John Adams's works, might find something to enjoy in Hass's direct and forceful orchestral rhetoric. The Bartok-like Fantasy for violin and piano corroborates Hass's apparent competency and craftsmanship. But since there's so much new music that already lives up to this standard, why choose this over any other?

Go past Jim Hiscott's dreadful *Blue Ocean*—based on simple three-chord vamps inspired by pop music of Zaire and Cuba—and enjoy his unpretentious, unadventurous string quartets and chamber and solo works. His first quartet harks back to Ravel's quartet; the sound of the second quartet resembles Bartok's quartets in general, though it is more relaxed and watered down than any by Bartok. Mostly, his pitch language is tonal (or modal) with mild angular chromatic twists. You may find the experience of listening to Hiscott's quartets a bit nostalgic; it may remind you of your first encounter with the quartets of Ravel and Bartok. If you're only on the lookout for the cutting edge, this is not for you. But if you'll enjoy taking a new path through stylistic territory from 100 years ago, this music can take you there.

As with Hiscott, you'll have to avoid one of Frank Proto's works to appreciate his music. *Creatures in Room 642*, for trumpet, percussion, and bass, is a middle-brow attempt to make classical music acceptable or interesting to children. It's an insult to the musical intelligence of grown-ups. Please! (Anyway, children

don't need to be pandered to; good music played well and talked about by enthusiastic people is enough to get them interested.)

Proto is an accomplished classical double bassist and jazz musician. Both of these elements show up in his music. *Three Episodes* for bass, piano, and oboe (doubling English horn) simmers along in cool jazzy quasi-tonal harmonies that remind me of Berg's Piano Sonata and sinewy atonal riffs and rhythms that remind me of Stefan Wolpe's chamber works. These superficial nods to thorny modernism eventually lapse into what sound like standard jazz ballads you'd hear in a cocktail lounge. The other two works show off Proto's formidable bass playing, first in an angular, dissonant (though not *avant-garde*) atonal style, and then in a lyrical, romantic cadenza-like double bass recitative followed by a fantasy on fragments from the third movement of Beethoven's Fifth.

Michael Hersch's music is uniformly ominous, bleak, apocalyptic, humorless. It's almost all dissonant, almost all slow. To produce the effect of this music, put the music of Feldman, Crumb, and Rihm in a blender, pour in some Debussy, add arsenic to taste. Poetry of the also bleak—and suicidal—WW I era Austrian George Trakl inspired the largest work, a string octet. This music goes much farther in the direction of Trakl's bleakness than Webern did in his song settings of Trakl poems. Tempted? One can enjoy Hersch's fearless probing of musical darkness; the penultimate movement of the octet, over a bass pedal point, develops exquisitely into a blistering climax far darker than any in Gorecki's depressing Third Symphony. If you're feeling the slightest bit suicidal, I suggest you avoid Hersch's music.

After listening to Hersch, I was refreshed by the light-hearted spirit of *Trios*, an *avant-garde* electronic sound-art group improvisation. Static. Bleep. Gurgle gurgle. Twang twang. Whirl whirl whirl. Zezezeze—while the sound of spoken text is heard played backwards, erratically speeding up and slowing down. Sometimes electric guitar and piano strings hammer and pluck away. Call it self-indulgent if you wish. But don't try to understand it; just marvel at its vivid sonic freshness and sense of humor.

Of the three orchestral releases in the current batch, Lee Johnson's seems the most out of place. It's new-age symphonic fluff. *Sand Floor Cathedral* (Symphony 5) sounds ethereal like Enja or the placid moments in *The Lord of the Rings* movies. In the third "movement", a soft disco beat enters, completing the "lite-FM" picture. If you run a Barnes & Noble bookstore and need some additional shopping-friendly background music, by all means add Lee Johnson to your collection.

Dating back to 1965, John Biggs's First Symphony is hardly new. It does appeal to my nostalgic instincts. The style is neo-classical with a romantic sweep, in the manner of Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*. At various moments, Piston's, Diamond's, and Zwilich's symphonies also come to mind. Stravinsky's ghost is also lurking. The first movement quotes and episodically develops the main motive from Stravinsky's Symphony in C. For its time, 1992, perhaps Biggs's Second Symphony sounds a bit dated. Its optimistic spaciousness and athletic exuberance bring Copland's *Appalachian Spring* to mind. If Martha Graham were alive, I could imagine her dancing to it.

The recent orchestral music on Elliot Schwartz's release disappoints me because it's more generic than his earlier compositions. There's not much to distinguish the works from one another. Cliched bombastic orchestral rhetoric dominates the argument from beginning to end. In the splashy dissonant but often pitch-centric, polished surface you'll hear echoes of Schwantner, Rouse, Druckman. Fleeting moments when obvious tonal chords and progressions punctuate the surface may even remind you of Richard Strauss, Leonard Bernstein, recent Penderecki, or sci-fi film soundtracks by Jerry Goldsmith. Though more or less effective in their own more restrained contexts, the intense orchestral gestures conjured by these composers lose their emotional urgency when cooked together in Schwartz's hyperbolic soup. (Perhaps it's all tongue-in-cheek. But then the humor is too heavy for me to enjoy.)

I'll take Robert Maggio's tasteful choral music over William McClelland's (reviewed last issue) any day. Again, it's in the American choral music tradition of Randall Thomson and Daniel Pinkham—a national blend of neoclassical and neoromantic strains. Maggio is quite a craftsman, with the traditional elements of this style: contrapuntal imitation, homophonic quartal harmonies, and tonal chords in weird combinations all contribute to a smooth, luxurious, sometimes mysterious, flow. *Rachel and Her Children*, a mini-oratorio accompanied by a small wind ensemble, sets seven poems by mid-century American writer Edna St Vincent Millay with an amalgam of musical styles woven together in an engaging unself-conscious way. Die-hard new music enthusiasts will find Maggio's music too conservative; recommended to choral music collectors only.

Libby Larson's new release is to solo and duo singing what Maggio's is to choral singing: tasteful, polished, moderate—no rough edges, no serious aesthetic or intellectual challenges for the listener. The tonal language is Ravel-like; spicier Berg-like harmonies sometimes trickle in. Composers looking for new sound colors

may be interested in hearing her startling use of a "Five Octave Hand Bell Choir" in the short cantata *Hell's Belles*. I suspect her American romantic songs hold more appeal for performers and casual concertgoers than for serious new music enthusiasts. Also, I find the uniform operatic vibrato of Rhodes and Williams a bit monotonous, lacking expressive variety.

Leslie Adams's Twelve Etudes are essentially an exercise in "style composition": compose a piece in the style of Chopin; in the style of Debussy; in the style of Hindemith. Adams seems to favor Chopin in particular; many times I was reminded not just vaguely of Chopin's music but of particular works and even particular passages by Chopin. Even if Chopin was alive, Adams would probably not be found guilty of copyright infringement, but Chopin would have a good case against him. To his credit, he sometimes mixes the styles up. Nevertheless, it is hard to discern an original compositional voice here.

Here's a nice meaty contribution to modernist piano repertoire. The piano cycles by Luc Marcel and Walter Boudreau are both satisfying. Marcel's *City of Angels* depicts cities in general, and Montreal in particular, through a series of 15 dense movements played without pause and lasting 42 minutes. Harsh, manic, fantastic waves of varied atonal harmonies surge and roar continuously. What kind of continuity? The harmonies tend to last anywhere from 3 to 15 seconds; each is treated to a frenetic tremolo arpeggiation; extensive use of the sustain pedal tends to blur and blend the notes of the chords as if they are smeared with a giant abstract expressionist paintbrush. One could criticize *City of Angels* for lacking differentiation; it's almost all at dynamic levels of fortissimo, forte, and mezzo-forte. It also lacks rhythm. The beauty is that its unrelenting frenetic mania—something like Scriabin's Sixth Sonata—has no use for rhythm, as it exists in a timeless euphoric state. Boudreau's *Planets* also hits a home run. In depicting the nine planets, the sun, and the infinity of outer space, it reveals a great variety of textures on its atonal harmonic tapestry. Congratulations to pianist Louis-Philippe Pelletier for the stamina it must take to play these ambitious works.

Finally, I'm glad to encounter the music of Romanian composer Horatio Radulescu for the first time. This is a good example of where stylistic labels break down: modernist, *avant-garde*, minimalist, post-minimalist, post-modernist—all these labels apply. Yet they are also irrelevant. Like Messiaen—a "modernist" in some sense—Radulescu combines a mystical spirit, a sense of the cosmic, with structural, technical, numerical imperatives. Also like Messiaen, Radulescu's harmonies inhabit the

gray areas between acoustic consonance and dissonance—"tonal oder atonal?" Yet where Messiaen's diverse harmonies derive from symmetrical scales, Radulescu's derive from his own overtone-based compositional theory. The startling color contrasts that result sound nothing like Messiaen's. Again, as in Messiaen's music, the literal repetition of short stony gestures creates eccentric continuities and discontinuities. But here Radulescu is better compared to Feldman—a so-called "avant-garde" minimalist—and to post-(pulse-)minimalist William Duckworth.

As in Duckworth's *Time Curve Preludes* (1979), one can sense in Radulescu's sonatas that there are planned patterns governing repetition, and long range forms and rhythms; one can sense that there are underlying structures generating the surface patterns we hear. These facets live independent of style. So, don't be misled into thinking the apparent "eclecticism" of Radulescu's music aims to comment on 20th Century compositional styles. On the contrary, what I find most refreshing is how it ignores issues of style. The sound of his music

Continued from page 243

poor theatrical skills seem to limit her expressivity. Still, Sieglinde's Narrative (from Act 1) is too bland; this is not the voice of a woman who desperately wants to be free of Hunding. Nor is her rendition of 'Du bist der Lenz' the exultant cry of one who feels that rescue is near. Isolde's Act 1 Narrative and Curse more truly reflects the character's emotions, in this case her pride and anger—that and her thrilling top notes make this a better performance. I always liked her as Chrysothemis, Elektra's sister, but she doesn't invest the words with as much meaning as Karita Mattila, never mind the young Rysanek. Ariadne is a role that seems tailored to Voigt's strength (on stage and off) and 'Es gibt ein Reich' shows her at her best.

The longest excerpt here is the final scene from *Salome*, starting with Salome's intense listening while waiting for Jochanaan's head to fall ("Es ist kein Laut zu Vernehmen"). It's a wonderful performance, vocally strong, intense and expressive, especially, as noted, when she sings softly and her voice becomes warmer and even more beautiful. I look forward to her recording the complete opera, as well as more complete Wagner roles. There's no doubt that she owns one of the best dramatic sopranos now active.

Armstrong's orchestral accompaniments are splendid, as is the sound. Texts and translations.

MOSES

comes not from his style, but from the originality of his musical imagination.

MAILMAN

Meet the Critic

Josh Mailman

Josh Mailman, a native of New York City, graduated from the University of Chicago with a major in Philosophy. After college, he threw over his two first loves, the guitar and viola, to learn to play the piano. Now he's writing his dissertation—a new theory of musical form, which may slightly alter the Earth's orbit—to earn his PhD in Music Theory at the Eastman School of Music, in Rochester, NY, where he also teaches music theory and writes for a local newspaper. When feeling ambitious, he programs computers to perform tasks software corporations wouldn't care about. Otherwise he listens attentively and lovingly to classical music of all periods and most styles. On sunny days in summer—a short season in Rochester—he most enjoys making abstract and surrealist paintings on his back porch.

Fritz Wunderlich

German Opera Arias
Arts 43009—51 minutes

Fritz Wunderlich spent five years in Stuttgart before he became a world figure. There in the provinces someone recorded and saved these radio performances. It was 1956 to 1959, and he was in his late 20s. The voice is young and fresh.

The *Magic Flute* aria ('Dies Bildnis') became his trademark: Tamino was his first operatic role and his last (a few days before he died). This is the earliest recording of it. The rest is rarities—things he never recorded later. There are arias by Cornelius, Lortzing, Kienzl, Schubert, and Beethoven. The scene from *The Barber of Baghdad* (Cornelius) lasts over 15 minutes and involves an imposing "black" bass, Kurt Böhme. It is an extended duet, fatherly bass exhorting youthful tenor. 'Vater, Mutter, Schwestern, Brüder' from Lortzing's *Udine* is sweet and winsome. The ten minutes from *Der Kuhreigen* by Kienzl are simply ecstatic—and totally unknown outside Germany. The Schubert (from *Fierrabras*) is rare even in Germany.

This is a beautiful recording, originally issued as Acanta 43267 (Sept/Oct 1989: 151). This 24-bit remastering sounds exactly the same to me as the Acanta. The Stuttgart Radio produced great sound that has never faded. There has hardly ever been a more beautiful tenor voice, and his career lasted only ten years, because he died young. Grab everything you can by him!

VRON

July/August 2004