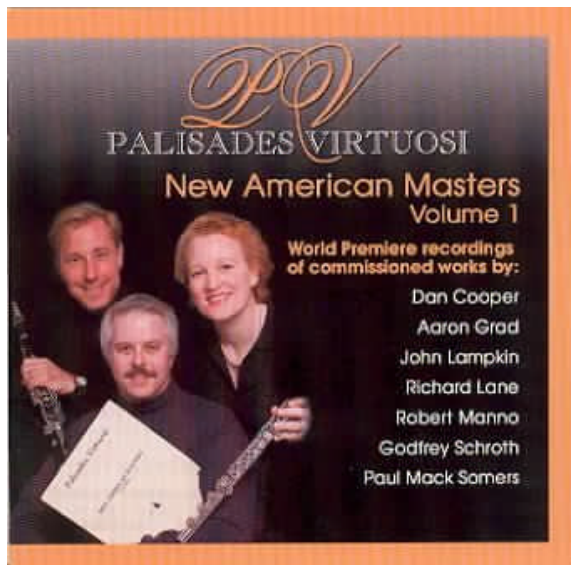


PALISADES VIRTUOSI: NEW AMERICAN MASTERS, VOLUME 1 •

Margaret Swinchoski (fl); Donald Mokrynski (cl); Ron Levy (pn) • ALBANY TROY 826 (69:47)

GRAD *Lep-i-dop-ter-ol-o-gy*. **MANNO** *Three Scenes from the Mountains*. **COOPER** Trio. **LANE** Trio No. 2. **SOMERS** *An Arch of Miniatures*. **SCHROTH** *Variations on an Appalachian Carol*. **LAMPKIN** *George Washington Slept Here!*



Palisades Virtuosi/New American Masters 1

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Now for some *really* good news—this one is a pure winner! ...feelings of relief and delight flooded my soul as each new piece proved its mettle. ...the measure of success can be directly correlated to the ability to forget that this ensemble is only two woodwinds and a piano. The sound is terrific and the performances couldn't be better. **Steven Ritter – Fanfare Magazine**

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Classical Reviews - Ensemble

Written by William Zagorski

- Monday, 04 June 2007

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The stylistic and emotional range of this release is as extraordinary as is Palisades Virtuosi's fine-tuned ensemble work. Despite its diversity, all of this music is quintessentially American. The only composer known to me is Robert Manno (b. 1944) whose music has been praised by Ned Rorem as "maximally personal and expressive"—qualities found in abundance in *Three Scenes from the Mountains*, composed in 2004. Manno's long experience as a chorister both at the New York Metropolitan Opera and the City Opera informs his music. I suspect that he conceives his soaring melodies first, and then harmonizes them. Whatever the case, the result is unfailingly satisfying. *Three Scenes from the Mountains* was inspired by views from his home in the Northern Catskills. The essences of the titles of its three movements—"The Wind on the Water," "The Meadow at Dawn," and "The Forest at Night"—are eloquently conveyed in this unabashedly post-Romantic music, music that in many ways forms the affective core of this release.

Virginia-born Aaron Grad (b. 1980) is the youngest composer on this program. A student violinist and pianist from age five, and a guitarist and song writer from age 10, he gravitated to New York City in 1998 in order to study jazz guitar at NYU, and quickly became attracted to New York's "downtown" new music scene. Given traditional esthetic "verities," he stands astride two mutually exclusive musical worlds—that of pop and jazz and that of serious music (okay, okay—let's say three worlds, which should make him, if nothing else, an astonishing contortionist). I don't know whether he is a contortionist or not. I do know, given the evidence here, that he is a fine composer with an original and refreshing voice—virtues that apply to all the composers on this offering. *Lep i dop ter ol o gy*, composed in 2003, was dedicated to Palisades Virtuosi's pianist, Ron Levy, who is an aficionado of butterflies. It is based on the most elemental of musical tools, the arpeggio, which, as a butterfly in flight, modulates freely—sometimes languidly, sometimes energetically—over asymmetrical meters. Implied lyricism and subtle rhythmic manipulation distinguish this highly metaphorical and evocative piece.

Dan Cooper's (b. 1970) mentor was Otto Luening. Among his principal teachers he counts John Heiss, Steve Mackey, and Paul Lansky. The essences of his Trio, composed in 2004, are communicated in its three movement's titles:

"Vaudevillians," "Barnacles," and "Kingston Bop." Cooper is fond of driving rhythms and, from time to time, of pressing the winds to the extremes of their compasses (he substitutes the piccolo for the flute, and the bass clarinet for the clarinet). This is the quirkiest piece on this offering. "Barnacles" sounds almost like a parody of Webern (albeit a loving one), with wide interval leaps and extreme metrical manipulations. "Kingston Bop" is a two-and-a-quarter minute romp full of instrumental virtuosity and the sly humor which, to a greater or lesser extent, informs each of Trio's bars.

Trio No. 2, composed in 2004 by Richard Lane, brings things back to the gentle lyricism of Robert Manno. New Jersey native Lane (1933–2004) studied at the Eastman School of Music. His teachers were José Echaniz and Armand Basile (piano), and Louis Mennini, Wayne Barlow, and Bernard Rogers (composition). Trio No. 2 is his last, and alas, unfinished, composition. His untimely death in 2004 precluded the completion of its third movement. Full of languid lyricism—long spun melodic arches over simple but telling harmonies—Trio No. 2 ends both seraphically and hauntingly.

Paul Mack Somers (b. 1942) studied composition with Warren Benson and George Andrix, and participated in master classes with Norman Dello Joio. His career is centered in New Jersey. Among his many activities, including serving as the director of the Classical New Jersey Society, writing musical criticism for two of New Jersey's most prominent newspapers, and performing as both a harpsichordist and conductor, he taught a university level "Music for Non-Music Majors" course whose students told him "in no uncertain terms that they simply were not interested in hearing any piece of music lasting more than three minutes," to quote his own liner note. He quickly realized that that brief time parameter

not only fit the pop music to which his students were accustomed, but also fit scads of classically legit miniatures (all those Chopin etudes and mazurkas, etc). *An Arch of Miniatures* , composed for Palisades Virtuosi in 2003, can be thought of as music for listeners with short attention spans. It consists of five movements—the longest weighing in at 4:05; the shortest at 1:41. It also encompasses many of the techniques and esthetic flavors of the other composers on this release. Mahler once said to Sibelius, “a symphony must contain a universe.” The challenge to the musical miniaturist on any point of our musicological space-time continuum is, somehow, to shoehorn that universe into a tiny time span. In *An Arch of Miniatures* Somers realizes that paradox with great resourcefulness and elegance.

I am lumping the two last composers together because they both present comparatively extended sets of variations on American themes. Godfrey Schroth (b. 1927) studied with Paul Creston—in my often-less-than-humble opinion, one of the finest of our mid-20th century composers. Among his semi-recent compositions is *Threnody for the Victims of September 11* . John Lampkin (b. 1946), studied piano and composition with Donald Waxman after attending Harvard. His *Insects: a Musical Entomology in Six Legs* for woodwind quintet won the Grand Prize in the 2001 Composers’ Guild Composition. Schroth’s *Variations on an Appalachian Carol* uses as its theme *I Wonder as I Wander* —an indigenous American tune that has been set with great distinction by, among others, Luciano Berio in his 1973 *Folk Songs for Mezzo Soprano and Instrumental Ensemble* . Schroth’s setting is variously pensive, agitated, serene, and more diatonically straight forward than Berio’s. Lampkin’s *George Washington Slept Here!* uses the melody *Soldier’s Joy* , a tune popular 250 years ago, as its point of departure. It was used as a fiddle tune in barn dances in colonial America and will be instantly recognizable. In these variations Lampkin shows himself to be a fine tongue-in-cheek humorist, but one who never loses respect for his source material.

In terms of intonation, articulation, and musical insight, Palisades Virtuosi represent the best of our current world-class standards. In an interview with the Empire Brass that I conducted eons ago, both first trumpet Rolf Smedvig and then tubist Sam Pilafian stated that their ensemble goal was “total meltdown,” meaning the sounding of a chord wherein the intonation and balance were so correct that the separate lines of the music melded into a unified whole. In the quieter moments of this music, Palisades Virtuosi achieve this routinely—and then there is all that louder passagework where they really wail.

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- Monday, 04 June 2007

You always have to wonder if, when presented with 70 minutes of flute, clarinet, and piano music— *new* music at that—the experience is going to even remotely border on the tolerable. Over the years I have heard much of this kind of music, and the pleasurable moments can probably be counted on one hand. It's not that the musicians fail me, though that certainly occurs every so often, but that the music is just not the quality one would hope for. Too often, when considering this type of rather unique or unusual ensemble, the tendency can be to "lighten up" on the critical aspects of the compositions themselves; after all, for such an instrumental makeup, you hardly expect Mozartian expertise, and you really do want to give the musicians a break. There is not that much music for this rather exclusive chamber setup, so let's assume from the beginning that the music will be second-rate, and then comment only on the performance itself. Wrong.

I gave up that approach many years ago. My philosophy, for what it is worth, is that *any* music, no matter for whom or for what it is composed, *has got to be good*. Especially in magazines like this, which serve as a filter for you, the Serious and sometimes-scammed Record Collector, it is all important to act as consumer advocate first and artist supporter second. It is your money that buys these albums, and we need to make sure that you at least have a fighting chance before breaking your nails trying to tear the plastic wrap off of any CD. So if it's not good, it's gone—we owe you that much.

Now for some *really* good news—this one is a pure winner! Even the hesitancy that I approached this with gradually wore away, and feelings of relief and delight flooded my soul as each new piece proved its mettle. Writing for this combination of instruments is no easy task, and each composer here has solved the problem in different ways. Just listen to the first piece, *Lep i dop ter o l o gy*, (named, obviously, for the study of butterflies) by 27-year-old composer Aaron Grad. The marvelous, infectious manner that he weaves his arpeggiated flutters among the three instruments, sometimes grouping them in twos yet still maintaining a constantly devoted sense of thematic unity, is a wonder to hear. Robert Manno's *Three Scenes from the Mountains* is perhaps my favorite piece on this recital. Its uncannily accurate depiction of the three movements, "The Wind on the Water," "The Meadow at Dawn," and "The Forest at Night" dispels any surly attempts at graphic tone-painting, and instead launches us into a beautifully contrived reverie of remembrances.

The other works here are equally affecting, and the measure of success can be directly correlated to the ability to forget that this ensemble is only two woodwinds and a piano. The sound is terrific and the performances couldn't be better. The Palisades Virtuosi is a new group, and plans to offer a similar release every two years. Let's hope it can fulfill that promise. **Steven Ritter**