

FEATURE REVIEW by William Zagorski

NEW AMERICAN MASTERS, VOLUME 2 • Palisades Virtuosi • ALBANY TROY1022 (76:04)

C. NEWMAN *Fantasia*. **F. E. Levy** Trio No. 2. **ESKOW** *Not a Sonata!* **SHAWN** *3 Nightscapes*.

FRANZETTI *4 Movements for Virtuosi*

NEW AMERICAN MASTERS, VOLUME 3 • Palisades Virtuosi • ALBANY TROY 1195 (71:22)

EWAZEN *Palisades Suite*. **SCHOBER** *Wind Space*. **MESSNER** *Eine Kleine Abendmusik*. **HYMAN** *Parable for a Parrot*. **FAUST** *3 American Portraits*. **MODEL** *The Spice of the Program*



I favorably reviewed Volume 1 of the Palisades Virtuosi's *New American Masters* series back in *Fanfare* 30:6. In fact, I rated it as a contender for Want List material. These subsequent two volumes in no way dim my enthusiasm. The New Jersey-based Palisades Virtuosi are truly definitive. That is to say that their standard of playing is both masterly and in full support of the contemporary composers who have contributed and will continue to contribute to their growing repertoire. They and their composers are exploring, and revealing, the possibilities of their unique ensemble.

As in Volume 1, these two new editions [Volumes 2 and 3] present a kind of music best defined by two of their composing contributors, Eric Ewazen and Carlos Franzetti. They, along with their colleagues, have long eschewed the partisan bickering of the 1960s and 70s between the adherents of tonalism and those of the Second Viennese School, and strive to produce what I call, for want of a better term, user-friendly music. This does not preclude bold harmonic excursions, working at the extremes of the instruments' ranges in search of new colors, or demonstrating true compositional rigor. Throughout their vastly differing works, all elements are geared toward realizing either a lyrical or dramatic flow that is at once apparent to the listener, and that bears true musical dividends with repeated hearings.

Caroline H. Newman (b.1951) is a Mannes College of Music graduate who also studied piano with Grace Castagnetta. Her *Fantasia*, composed in 2006, is a charmer—seemingly a fluent improvisation that is, paradoxically tightly structured, and that teases out disarmingly lovely timbres from both the flute and clarinet.

Frank Ezra Levy was born in Paris in 1930. He studied cello with Leonard Rose and later with Janos Starker. As a composer, he has published more than 99 works, all subsidized by his day job as a performing cellist (not a bad confluence of circumstances). His Trio No. 2 (2006) is a contrapuntal *tour de force*. Fugue and canonic imitation abound along with moments of free development. The result is a hauntingly melancholic mini odyssey full of both quiet whimsy and resignation despite its sprightly finale.

Jazz is writ large in this music by Gary Eskow (b.1951)—a Warren County, N.J. resident who is also a writer in the field of music. Among his interviewees can be counted John Corigliano and Eminem—an impressively genre-busting range that underscores the refreshing eclecticism of so many of our contemporary “classical” composers. *Not a Sonata!*'s (2005) opening movement is an homage to Francis Poulenc titled “Merci, Monsieur P.” Les Six, more or less disciples of Erik Satie, believed that music should be a simple and unproblematic celebration of life. While the musical worth of jazz was being debated in the 1920s in America, the French had no cultural or esthetic problem with it whatsoever. The second movement, “Remembering Ray,” is a tribute to Ray Charles, appropriately conjuring up his unique sound world. The following movement, “Coconut Cream,” does the same for Henri Mancini, and the finale, a multitonal romp titled “Scherzophrenia,” brings the piece to a close in a blaze of tongue-in-cheek glory.

Allen Shawn (b.1948) grew up in New York City. He later studied at Harvard with Leon Kirchner and Earl Kim. After subsequently studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, he ultimately joined the faculty of Bennington College. *Three Nightscapes* (2006) was commissioned by Palisades Virtuosi and is a deeply eloquent threnody on the death of his mother.

Argentinean-born (1948) American composer Carlos Franzetti, like so many of his musical brethren, wears several musicological hats. As a pianist, he is an accomplished jazz improviser, arranger, and composer from a world that makes little distinction between pop and so-called serious music—a culture that could make Astor Piazzolla a mind-expanding musical visionary and that could produce, closer to our time, the eclectically minded Osvaldo Golijov. Franzetti's spellbinding *Four Movements for Virtuosi*, commissioned by this ensemble in 2005, combines an almost Debussian impressionism heightened by jazz inflections and suffused with the flavors and fragrances of his native Argentina, and all realized via a Bachian clarity of purpose.

Born in Chicago in 1954 and trained at the Eastman School of Music and at Juilliard, Eric Ewazen can count Milton Babbitt, Samuel Adler, Warren Benson, Joseph Schwantner, and Gunther Schuller among his teachers. His typically lyrically inspired *Palisades Suite (A Trio for Our Time)* was commissioned by Palisades Virtuosi 2007 and dedicated to this ensemble. The result is pure Americana—instantly accessible and sweetly harmonized. Put another way, it is music that never fails to sing and/or to dance.

Accomplished organist Brian Schober (b.1951) likewise studied composition at the Eastman School with, among others, Samuel Adler and Joseph Schwantner. He pursued further studies in Paris with Olivier Messiaen and with organists Jean Guillou and André Isoir. His *Wind Space* (a 9/11 commemorative work) is the polar opposite of Ewazen's *Palisades Suite*. Ewazen's message is that of, to quote him, "hope, resolution ... and a heartfelt peace"; Schober's is that of utter desolation and emptiness, realized via the development of a few arpeggio-like melodic kernels—a development that makes its progress seem, paradoxically, static. Augmented playing techniques are employed, creating a panoply of otherworldly sound effects from both the flute and the clarinet.

Pianist/composer Fred Messner (b.1926) is a quintessentially practical American musician who began his professional career by playing the piano in his teens. Ultimately becoming a Juilliard alumnus, he is the composer of countless popular songs that have been broadcast on both radio and television. His *Eine Kleine Abendmusik*, a gracious wisp of a waltz, was composed as a gift for the Palisades Virtuosi in 2007.

Dick Hyman—pianist, organist, arranger, music director, and composer of both film and concert scores—by now needs no introduction. The initial incarnation of his *Parable for a Parrot* was as a piano improvisation included in his Century of Jazz Piano project. This 2007 recasting of it commissioned by the Palisades Virtuosi teases out its hitherto unrealized contemplative nature.

Randall E. Faust (b.1947) is currently a professor of music at Western Illinois University where he teaches horn, brass chamber music, and music theory. He is also the hornist of the Camerata Woodwind Quintet and the LaMoine Brass Quintet. The musical language of his *Three American Portraits* of 2007—"Travelling Toccata," "Reflective Rhapsody," and "Homecoming March"—is appealingly warm-hearted, folksy, and, in its second section, deeply moving.

Ben Model (b.1962) is a master of both the piano and the theater organ who has carved out a niche for himself as one of America's leading silent-film composer/accompanists. Since 1984 he has plied his craft and co-curated at the silent film department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The *Spice of the Program* of 2005 is his tribute to the two-reel comedy films that served as the opening attractions during the silent era—attractions that often had more audience drawing power than the main act itself. As a boy, Dmitri Shostakovich accompanied silent films on the piano in a drafty Leningrad movie house. He grew to loathe the experience despite the fact that it later, and often eloquently, informed much of his music. Given the delightful evidence of this piece, Ben Model, on the other hand, finds it nothing short of a labor of love.

These performances by the Palisades Virtuosi are definitive in both the quality of their technical execution and staggering stylistic command. Having heard them in live concert, I can say that the sound on these two offerings does them justice.

Highly recommended for all the reasons resident in this perhaps all too long review. **William Zagorski**

This article originally appeared in Issue 34:2 (Nov/Dec 2010) of *Fanfare Magazine*.