

NEW AMERICAN MASTERS, VOLUME SEVEN: SONGS & STORIES

Palisades Virtuosi; Frank Basile (narr); Timothy Maureen Cole (sop, narr); Barbara Dever (mezzo); John Ostendorf (narr); Marisol Espada (cello)

• 4TAY 4060 (2 CDs: 141:13)

SEDEK *Portraits of Van Gogh*. **JUNEAU** *Songs from the Laurel Tree*.

KAUFMAN *Paterson*. **STUBBLEFIELD** *Fire Diamond*.

LEVY *El Dorado*. **BARAB** *Sea Princess*. **TURNER** *Vathek Revisited*

FEATURE REVIEW by **Colin Clarke**

Stimulating fare is offered here in the seventh volume of the *New American Masters* series. The narrated *Portraits of Van Gogh* (2010) is a little masterpiece of its kind. Written by Martin A. Sedek, it is narrated by John Ostendorf, whose rich, resonant bass voice is really rather compelling. There is a delicacy to Sedek's writing that appeals, underpinning and supplementing the texts that tell the story of Van Gogh's path to greatness. We hear the touching story of his encounters with Gauguin at Arles, and of a sudden brutal attack viscerally portrayed by the instrumentalists. As Vincent's insanity grew, including the story of his self-mutilation, a single flute line reflects the artist's increasing isolation; similarly, when the artist paints constantly, flowing, almost Impressionist streams and swirls on piano take us to that new mobility, but also to the heady intoxication of Van Gogh's art. This brings us to the next movement, "Starry Night," by far the most immediately welcoming and warm, reflective and ruminating, stretch of the piece. Van Gogh's predilection for dying sunflowers finds its reflection in the final movement of that name, a meditation on the darkness within Van Gogh and the beauty of that darkness. All three instrumentalists are stunning, but perhaps special praise should go to the eloquence of Ron Levy's piano solos. Based on Van Gogh's speculative quest for hidden beauty, German-born, Polish-American composer Sedek creates a hypnotic web of sound.

Scored for flute, clarinet/bass clarinet, piano, and mezzo, Thomas Juneau's *Songs from the Laurel Tree* meditates on the original laurel tree, Daphne (the name referring to the Greek myth in which Daphne is turned into a laurel tree in order to escape the affections of Apollo). Juneau sets poems by Eavan Boland ("Daphne with her Thigh in Bark"), Anne Sexton ("Where I live in the honorable house of the Laurel Tree"), Edna St. Vincent Millay ("Daphne"), Colin Way Reid ("Daphne After"), and Margaret Kaufman ("Waking"). An emotional journey from frustration through to acceptance of her fate, Juneau tracks the terrain with imaginative scoring and occasional wit ("Daphne's Dance," the third and central movement of five that sets the St. Vincent Millay, reeks of the cabaret and stale cigarette smoke). It's quite a change to hear the vernal sounds of "Daphne After," described in the score as "Pastoral" and indeed every inch just that; Juneau's ability to create palpable lightness in the final "Daphne Wakes" is a testament to his skill. He has the finest of interpreters here, not least in the expressive strains of mezzo Barbara Dever.

Written in 2018 to a text by William Carlos Williams that describes a city as a man peopled by thoughts, *Paterson* by Jeffrey Kaufman creates a pensive space in which the narrator can place Williams's ruminations. A sudden mechanistic passage after the eight-minute mark makes a huge effect, highlighting the later softening of the music's surface. Disc 1 closes with a purely instrumental composition, composer and tubaist Roger Stubblefield's 2017 piece *Fire Diamond*, based upon a Buddhist story of a diamond held at the summit of the Chomolungma Mountain in Tibet that gives enlightenment to the brave seeker who can ascend to that hallowed height. The music is a colorful exposition of this idea (a brave subject to cover with just three players), a mini-drama/tone poem with moments of ritualistic repetition that map onto the idea of the vital Tibetan mantra, "Om Mani Padme Hum," that culminates in a manic dance.

The second disc begins with a brief song, *El Dorado* (2003, revised 2019) inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's late (1849) poem entreating us all not to waste our time in the pursuit of that which we may not achieve. The setting, an acerbic march, is by Ron Levy, the pianist of Palisades Virtuosi. It leads to Seymour Barab's *Sea Princess* (2005), which sets Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 story, a setting that lasts nearly 51 minutes. Although it is scored for one singer/narrator, that performer has to take on a wide range of voices. Cole is simply fabulous; she has a voice made for musical theater, a lightness of delivery, and a complete grasp of Barab's intentions. There is a sort of French/Stravinsky accent to the music; Palisades Virtuosi lighten their sound and texture appropriately. Looking around at other reviews of Barab's music, my colleague John Story hits the nail on the head when he begins his 2001 review of an all-Barab disc with the sentence, "Seymour Barab must be an exceedingly happy man, to judge from the music heard here" (*Fanfare* 25:1)—and here too, as it goes. I did enjoy his *Little Red Riding Hood* on Centaur (*Fanfare* 41:3), just as I enjoy the wit here

(occasionally risqué, or is that just my dirty mind?). Cole is the ideal interpreter; her “Your Highness, when summoned,” with its glorious witchy lyrics, is something I for one will never forget. Not only can she take on different voices of different characters, she can differentiate between musical theater/opera/narrator at the drop of a hat. Cole is something of a polyglot: she is a podcaster (on cinema) and seems to have a laudable affinity with the tarot, too.

Finally, there comes Kerry Turner’s *Vathek Revisited*, its title echoing William Beckford’s 1782 gothic novel *Vathek*. The two pieces on the second disc are linked by their interest in the paranormal, whether witches or, as here, a character who renounces Islam to search for supernatural powers—powers that are eventually to no avail, as *Vathek* ends up wandering aimlessly in a Hell ruled over by the demon Elblis. Turner, whose name many will know from the American Horn Quartet, wrote this piece immediately after reading the novel, and the piece represents his reaction to it, rather than a blow-by-blow account of the story. Readings from the novel intersperse the performance here, and Turner uses as part of his musical materials a 16th-century Turkish harem song by Sultan Bayezid II. This is a bright and breezy score that sits in perfect accord with its disc partner. It’s lovely, too, how the two discs here have completely different characters.

Texts, where appropriate, are available at Palisades Virtuosi’s website, as is a valuable supplementary explanatory note for Paterson that expands greatly on both the Williams piece and his poetry. The recording is well done, as are all production values. This is a highly imaginative release, nigh on two and a half hours of fine music, superbly performed. **Colin Clarke**