

NEW AMERICAN MASTERS, VOLUME SIX

• Palisades Virtuosi • ALBANY 1669 (78:50)

ALBERT *DogTales*. **BAIER** *Syzygy*. **FRIEDMAN** *Reflections*.

MARCEL *Evocare II*. **TING HO** *I'm away from my desk*.

JEFF SCOTT *Poem for a Lost King*. **SCHOCKER** *Trio No. 2*.

FEATURE REVIEW by **Colin Clarke**

The New American Masters series continues with a disc of chamber music played by the Palisades Virtuosi: Margaret Swinchoski, flute; Donald Mokrynski, clarinet; and Ron Levy, piano. The way a series such as this introduce us (me, at least) to music that might never otherwise come our way is something to be eternally thankful for.

The composer Adrienne Albert is represented a number of times in the *Fanfare* Archive, always positively. Albert was known for a long time as a singer, collaborating with Igor Stravinsky and Leonard Bernstein, no less. Stellar company! Her *Dog Tales* (2014) for flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, and piano is an absolutely delightful trilogy. The first story, "The Dog Night," was inspired by the tale of the disappearance and return of her rescue dog, Dodger (aptly named, it turns out, given that there are apparently many four- to six-lane highways in Los Angeles). Each of its movements has a tale to tell. The first, "Three Dog Night," inspired by the composer's dog-sitting for the neighbors (full of restless motifs, overlapping phrases, changing time signatures), is composed with a deft hand and performed absolutely beautifully. It is not just that the players have a deft touch; they clearly love this music. Next up, "The Artful Dodger" is a seven-minute tone poem to Albert's own canine friend. Small wonder it feels so affectionate, including a loving wit. Wistful moments presumably meditate upon what might have happened to Dodger had he not been so good at his named craft. There is a sense of a slow dance about this, the anacrusis of which seems to the present writer to reference *Für Elise* (Therese Malfatti might have had something to say about that). The alternative instruments of piccolo and bass clarinet come into play (in both senses) in the finale, "Mutt and Steff," with the piccolo as a chihuahua and the bass clarinet as a Great Dane. There is something almost Gallic about this diversion, in which the two dogs decide how to get along with one another.

There is much less of New York-based Matthew Baier's music available. His piece *Syzygy* (2005) refers to an astronomical phenomenon of the sun, moon, and Earth being in a straight line. Bauer's work is dodecaphonic, and proves that 12-tone music can be approachable, too. Like Schoenberg, Baier married this process with accepted forms born of tonal relationships, in this case the sonata form. But variation form is vital here too, as is fugue. If that sounds like overload for an eight-minute piece, it really is not; it all evolves naturally and beautifully. Actually, "beautiful" is a keyword here, exemplified perfectly by the end. I just wanted a little more space for that close to resonate before the beginning of the next piece, though.

That next work is Brooklyn-born Gary William Friedman's *Reflections* (2015). The composer traces its lineage back to the free-form jazz experiments of the 1960s (which he participated in as a jazz saxophonist). No furious free-for-all this; as the title implies, it's time to slow things down, to unwind (and indeed the lines of flute and clarinet do seem to entwine a lot). It is very different from Linda Marcel's elusive *Evocare II*. (Note that Marcel and Ho's positions are reversed in the booklet, so if you're not careful you may end up reading the note for the wrong piece; the same applies for the Scott and Schocker pieces.) Marcel's work explores sound from a variety of angles, including asking the musicians to play Tibetan prayer bowls (placed both inside and outside of the piano, hence the extra "percussion" sounds). If the Baier was all about rigor, this is about a sort of post-Debussy relishing of timbre itself; it is perfectly placed in the program.

Anyone who has worked in an office will appreciate Ting Ho's *I'm away from my desk* (2011), an email response that might indicate a vacation. Of course, many office workers are "away" from their desks a lot of the time, lost in thought about just those vacations. Ho offers three obviously linked scenarios: "Stepped Out"; "Stepped Out Again"; "Stepped out last time." The piece is actually very cleverly constructed and beautifully written, as well as having a clever wit about it; it positively benefits from groups who, like the Palisades Virtuosi, can perform it with such high levels of exactitude. This is particularly true of the finale. I am presuming Ting Ho is not the same composer as Liu Ting Ho, the latter of which had a piece issued on a rather specialist label, Hong Kong HK, reviewed in *Fanfare* back in 1981 (4:3). The present Ting Ho currently serves as lecturer at Montclair State University.

Horn player and composer Jeff Scott contributes the dramatic, gestural *Poem for a Lost King* (2012), an homage to African Kings (particularly West African) who were abducted from their lands during the "Middle

Passage” era, composed in the hope of reconciliation and peace. It is programmatic in bent, depicting children at play, a slightly ritualistic “Dance of the Village Elders and Chiefs,” and a final “Furtive Attack.”

Composer/flutist/pianist Gary Schocker made his debut at 15 with the Philadelphia and New York Philharmonic orchestras—quite a prodigy, then. The title of his Trio No. 2 gives no hint of the lightness of the movements: “Flip” (as in flippancy); “Old Flame” (as in a “torch song”); and “Fancypants” (a sort of post-Haydn minuet cast in slowish 6/8 time). There’s nothing wrong with the bright, tonal melodies of “Flippancy,” and how Palisades Virtuosi relishes the games the score offers. Clarinetist Daniel Mokrynski’s initial line is beautifully smoky; Margaret Swinchoski’s flute joins in, taking the line higher like an ascending wisp of smoke. Schocker forges beautiful delicacy in this movement. His writing is ever eloquent, always clever, and beautifully realized here.

The real heroes here are the members of Palisades Virtuosi, who deliver faultless renditions throughout of this varied selection of pieces with unflagging enthusiasm and freshness. **Colin Clarke**