

NEW AMERICAN MASTERS, VOLUME SEVEN: SONGS & STORIES

Palisades Virtuosi; Frank Basile(narr); Timothy Maureen Cole⁵ (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 **Ken Meltzer**

The American chamber ensemble Palisades Virtuosi (Margaret Swinchoski, flute; Donald Mokrynski, clarinet; Ron Levy, piano) originated in 2002. In the ensuing two decades, the Palisades Virtuosi have been tireless advocates of new music, commissioning and premiering almost 100 compositions. Volume 7 of the Trio's *New American Masters* series focuses upon Palisades Virtuosi commissions that include a storytelling component. While the featured works comprise a wide range of approaches and musical voices, they are all written in a highly accessible and pleasing idiom. Martin A. Sedek's *Portraits of Van Gogh* (2010), for flute/alto flute, clarinet/bass clarinet, piano, and narrator, focuses upon the Dutch painter's tragic life. Each of the four movements refers to an iconic Van Gogh painting (*The Potato Eaters*, *Bedroom at Arles*, *Starry Night*, *Sunflowers*), serving to reflect a period in the artist's life and struggles. *Songs from the Laurel Tree* (2017) by Thomas Juneau, scored for flute, clarinet/bass clarinet, piano, and mezzo-soprano, is based upon the Daphne legend. As the composer describes, the cycle of five songs, settings of poetry by Eavan Boland, Anne Sexton, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Colin Way Reid, and Margaret Kaufman, charts the progression of Daphne's "various emotional stages including frustration, flirtation, acceptance, which all culminate in her apotheosis." The writing throughout for both the vocalist and ensemble is lyrical and expressive. The third movement, "Daphne's Dance," a setting of Millay's "Daphne" ("Why do you follow me?"), evokes Carmen's *Habanera* from Bizet's opera, a delightful touch. Jeffrey Kaufman's *Paterson* (2018), inspired by the poetry of William Carlos Williams, is scored for flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, cello, piano, and narrator. The work focuses upon Williams's concept "that a man himself is a city beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody – if imaginatively conceived – any city all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions." Jazz plays an important role in this evocative score. The first disc concludes with *Fire Diamond* (2016), for flute, clarinet, and piano. Roger Stubblefield's work depicts a seeker's mystical encounter with the large and brilliant diamond residing at the summit of the Chomolungma Mountain in Tibet. The colorful instrumental tone poem evokes the spirit of French Impressionism.

Disc two opens with Ron Levy's setting of Edgar Allen Poe's "El Dorado." Levy originally composed the song in 2003. In 2019, he arranged it for flute, bass clarinet, piano, and baritone. Levy created the latter version for Palisades Virtuosi. The terse and propulsive music mirrors Poe's "warning about wasting one's life in an obsessive search...." *Sea Princess* (2005) is Seymour Barab's 50-minute recounting of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. The work originated as a commission for Palisades Virtuosi and *Sesame Street*'s Bob McGrath. The recording features a performance by the Palisades Virtuosi and soprano/narrator Timothy Maureen Cole, who plays the roles of the story's various characters. *Sea Princess* is cast in a Broadway/Disney idiom, designed to appeal to a demographic of which I am not a part. But that in no way detracts from the piece's charm, or the fine quality of the performance. *New American Masters* concludes with Kerry Turner's *Vathek Revisited* (2014), for flute, clarinet, piano, and narrator. The work is based upon William Beckford's 1782 gothic novel *Vathek*. A narrator reads various excerpts from the novel that "intersperse and illustrate each of the (instrumental) movements." *Vathek Revisited* incorporates Middle Eastern elements, including the frequent presence of a 16th-century harem song, "Neva pesrev fate."

As previously noted, all of the works on this collection were commissioned and premiered by Palisades Virtuosi. The recordings are testaments to the ensemble's dedication to, and enthusiasm for, the featured compositions. Their playing is unfailingly spirited, colorful, and sculpted with the greatest care. The contributions of the various "guest artists" are also quite admirable. The sound quality is excellent, offering a natural, rich, and well-balanced acoustic. The CD set's liner notes may be supplemented by "a full CD booklet" accessible via the internet. Palisades Virtuosi are to be commended for their commitment to new music, both in performance and recordings. I think it's a commitment worthy of support. If you are intrigued by what I admit is rather specialized repertoire, I do recommend this recording to you. **Ken Meltzer**

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