

COMPACT DISC REVIEWS

Maya Beiser: *TranceClassical*

Works for cello, voice, and electronics by J.S. Bach, Michael Gordon, Imogen Heap, Glenn Kotche, Lou Reed, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, Mohammed Fairouz, David T. Little, Hildegard of Bingen, and Maya Beiser. Innova 952 (2016). UPC: 726708695224

NINA C. YOUNG

Maya Beiser's *TranceClassical* is a time machine that transports the listener through a very personal retrospective of diverse musical interests encapsulated in a hazy scrim of cello, voice, and electronics. With the familiar, soft crackling of an old vinyl record popping and hissing during an all-cello arrangement of Bach's famous *Air on the G String*, avant-garde cello star Maya Beiser invites you into her surreal, genre-crossing, post-modern patchwork quilt threaded together with themes of reverie, meditation, and Jewish liturgy. Michael Gordon's *All Vows* coats Maya's melancholic and meandering solo cello line in vast resonances that carry one to a (Jewish) house of prayer. Beiser's cover of synth-pop artist Imogen Heap's *Hide and Seek* enhances the original's mesmerizing use of vocal processing with the addition of cello lines. These both double the processed harmonies and introduce new melodic lines that create a rising textural arc to the song's form. A beautiful duality is established between the mechanical and robotic feel of the vocoded vocals and the timbral warmth of the cello. Delays and reverb tails mixed around energetic cello arpeggios and tremolos allow you to lose yourself in textural and harmonic bliss in *Three Parts Wisdom* by Wilco drummer Glenn Kotche. Beiser's voice returns as the central focus in David Lang's abstracted arrangement of Lou Reed's *Heroin*. Although the juxtaposition of Maya's dreamy, breathy vocals with the cello arpeggios are initially transfixing, the temporal pacing drags, despite the introduction of some textural distortion near the end.

If this album is to take you in and out of a trance in 67 minutes, MacArthur Fellow and Pulitzer Prize winning composer Julia Wolfe's *Emunah* (Hebrew for "belief") is the central and deepest part of the journey. The music is reminiscent of the ancient and sacred, as the restless and turbulent dissonances of the voice and cello duet masterfully maintain a constant and never-

rewarded search for resolution, perhaps a metaphor for the journey towards faith. Resolve is found in Mohammed Fairouz's *Kol Nidrei* (All Vows) in which Maya sings the Aramaic text in dialogue with gorgeous cello melodies—this is true incantation. David T. Little's driving *Hellbound* is based on Robert Johnson's *Hellbound On My Trail* (1937), with direct nods at distortion, riffs, shredding, and black metal. In a contrast, thoroughly complete and perhaps intentional, the album closes with Beiser's solemn and reverent cello arrangement of Hildegard von Bingen's *O Virtus Sapientiae* (Strength of Wisdom).

If you have any qualms about cover songs, genre-blending, or electronics, suspend the disbelief and enter a trance-state with Maya Beiser. This is an album that you listen to—with great relish—from start to finish.

Nina C. Young is a New York based composer who works in acoustic, electronic, and mixed music. She is an Assistant Professor of Music and Multimedia Performance at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and is co-Artistic Director of the new music sinfonietta Ensemble Échappé. Her music is published by peermusic Classical. (www.ninacyoung.com)

Muses Trio: *The Spirit and the Maiden*

Christa Powell, violin; Louise King, cello; Therese Milanovic, piano. Published by Muses Trio; Australian Music Center, 2760 (2016)

KIMBERLY GREENE

The Muses Trio, buoyed by their devotion to music by women and their audiences' enthusiastic response to their live performances, conceived of and recorded *The Spirit and the Maiden*, a CD which contains some of the most rare and beautiful compositions in the repertoire. According to violinist Christa Powell, "What started as merely addressing the imbalance of female representation in music has very quickly evolved into a social movement for us, with the focus of connecting and supporting creative women and highlighting stories of powerful women and gender inequality" (Eslake, *CutCommon*, 2016).

Rather than a haphazard sampling of the works of eminent women composers, this eclectic and extraordinary assemblage of compositions shares the governing premise of aestheticism by engendering

beauty and impacting the senses, the intellect, and the emotions of the audience. Accordingly, at the premiere of Amy Beach's earliest composition for violin and piano, *Romance*, op. 23, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893), the audience was so enraptured by the impressive melodic material that an encore performance occurred before the concert could continue. In addition, although Nadia Boulanger declared to the press her disinterest in promoting the performance of any of her compositions, sadly, due to her belief that the works served as a "testament to her inadequacy" as a composer, *Trois pieces pour violoncelle et piano* stands as a stylistic departure and surpasses most of the compositions of the men of this period—even the works of her celebrated students and the formidable contribution of François Poulenc, et al. (Rosentiel, *Nadia Boulanger: A Life in Music*, 1982). As the final member of the historical vanguard of women composers included on this CD, Vítězslava Kaprálová's *Elegie* for violin and piano reflects the *Zeitgeist* of her times. Written in Paris a year and a half before her untimely death, *Elegie* exemplified the impending horror that would engulf Europe through the somber melody, the cultural musical language, and the dissonant harmonic material occurring in the piano.

The Spirit and the Maiden also presents the music of some of the most significant and active Australian women composers who participate in that enthusiastic and vibrant national musical milieu. The stunning but delicate piano solo *Song for a Comb Man* by award-winning and former Princeton Graduate Fellow Kate Neal bathes the listener in its shimmering simplicity and exquisite melodic passages, accomplishing the composer's desire to "create an experience for my audience that may engage or transport them" (Australian Music Center). Similarly, the languid and sauntering *Soñando de tí* and *Contemplación (Two Boleros)* (Dreaming of You and Contemplation) arranged for piano trio by jazz artist and composer Louise Denson, envelop the audience with luxurious, rich, captivating Cuban melodic and harmonic material. Cécile Elton's most recent and compelling composition, *Tango Insomnio de la ciudad* (Tango for a Sleepless City), was written specifically for the Muses Trio, and was inspired by "her vivid experiences of the grandeur of New York

City.” The Trio’s deft handling of nuance and dynamics here is admirable.

With over eighty performances in the first four years after its composition, Judith Bingham’s *Chapman’s Pool*, for piano trio, communicates directly with the audience and engenders, according to the composer, a “painful kind of beauty” (Thomas, *Music Web International*, 2002). The four-movement work depicts a cove on the Isle of Purbeck in the county of Dorset that remains calm in fine weather, but is perilous in stormy conditions. The composition was inspired by the composer’s personal struggle with the “complex and dark relationship with her mother and the despair that comes with the end of such a relationship,” which is reflected in the juxtaposition of a quiet and agitated musical language, similar to the ebb and flow of the sea (*The Spirit and the Maiden*, Liner Notes, 2016). Great delicacy was required on the part of the Muses Trio to effect the emotional ranges the composer required of the performers.

The piano trio movements *Pale Yellow* and *Fiery Red* by the Pulitzer prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon represent a challenge in capturing the essence of color musically: “The colors that I have chosen in both movement titles of the *Piano Trio* and the music itself reflect very different moods and energy levels, which I find fascinating, as it begs the question, can colors actually convey a mood?” (The Kennedy Center). In this context, *Pale Yellow* commences in a pensive manner, then develops and transforms, “perhaps reflecting the spreading light at sunrise” (The Kennedy Center). The expressive second piano trio movement, *Fiery Red*, explodes immediately, remains relentless, and is permeated with thematic repetition and transformations that are crafted adeptly by the composer. The Muses Trio is equally adept at conveying the composer’s intentions.

The title track, *The Spirit and the Maiden*, is by Australian composer and pianist Elena Kats-Chernin (born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 1957), heralded by her country as one of its leading and most productive contemporary composers. Originally entitled *The Maiden and the Well Spirit* and composed for the Macquarie Trio, the three-movement composition for violin, cello, and piano musically renders a Russian fable. The first movement recounts the tale of a young Russian maiden transporting buckets of water back to her

village. As she glances into the well, she sees, then feels, the hand of a beautiful young man who then emerges from the water. The music captures the mystical and alluring aspects of the romantic encounter with the agitated violin and cello entrance, closely followed by the introduction of the passionate, yet pensive, thematic material introduced dramatically in octaves by the piano. Kats-Chernin exploits the beauty of the piano trio through her deft mastery of duet and trio passages. The exceptional performance by the Muses Trio dwells in their aggressive and impassioned engagement with the musical narrative and their unified musical aesthetic and nuanced interpretation of the musical material.

Reminiscent of the fervent Russian dances in quadruple meter, the second movement depicts the maiden and the water spirit in a flirtatious, yet ultimately dangerous *danse macabre*. Overwhelmed with delight, the maiden fails to notice that the beautiful water spirit is evaporating right before her eyes. When she twirls to face him, he transforms back to water and falls to the ground. In keeping with the narrative, the vehement, uncompromising melodic material begins to disappear, the musical texture diminishes, the tempo slows, and the music dissipates.

The narrative of the solemn third movement follows the maiden as she returns the spirit to the well and is drawn down after him. The music expresses this *Liebestod* (or tragedy of misbegotten love) with a more dissonant musical language than is present in the earlier movements. The melody is played mournfully by the violin, with an occasional dialogue with the cello and a delicate piano performance that resembles falling tears or raindrops. As the maiden dies, the music unexpectedly becomes agitated and increasingly more dissonant; the texture dissolves and finally disappears.

The quality of the performances of the Muses Trio throughout speaks to their ability to seemingly effortlessly access an extensive range of emotions and technique. Their commitment and dedication to promote the music of women is equally impressive and should stand as a call to arms for a resurgence in the scholarship, performance, and recording of the repertoire of women. Also notable is the twelve-page booklet that accompanies the CD.

Kimberly Greene serves as a professor of music history at California State University, Ful-

lerton. She completed her PhD in musicology at Claremont Graduate University and is a recipient of the Walker Parker Memorial Endowment Fellowship (CGU, 2008) and the Albert A. Friedman Research Grant (CGU, 2009). She holds a master’s degree in Music History & Literature from CSUF, with additional degrees in German Studies, French Language & Literature, and Business Administration.

Danae Xanthe Vlasse: *Celebrations and Commemoration*

Original works for piano (2017)

ANNA RUBIN

Danae Xanthe Vlasse, composer, pianist, and teacher, is a self-described neo-Romantic, as illustrated in the new CD, which she has produced, *Celebrations and Commemoration*. She performs a selection of her original works for piano. The music shows a strong command of chromatic harmony and traditional thematic development. Stylistically, a listener may be forgiven for thinking that these works were written in the nineteenth century. Vlasse includes an improvisation on a Brahms intermezzo; other works show strong influences from Beethoven, Chopin, and Rachmaninoff. One track includes a backtrack of atmospheric MIDI strings. Vlasse composes for film and television and has been awarded accolades for her work.

I found her three-movement *Sonata in F-sharp minor* to be the most compelling work on the disc. Entitled “Farewell,” it begins with a slow, simple, and haunting chord progression and a chain of effective suspensions. The second movement, “Absence,” moves from spare, high octaves; a melancholy tune is then developed in a series of modulations and 2:3 rhythms between the voices. It builds to a satisfying climax and ends with an evocation of the opening high notes. “Return,” the last movement, begins with a lively dance that constantly changes in registration, texture, and mood; it varies from turbulent figuration to lighter sections with mazurka-like dotted rhythmic figures. It ends quietly, as do the other movements.

Unfortunately, Vlasse’s work, while competently performed, has not been well-served by the recording, which lacks clarity and spatial resonance. The CD is available on iTunes, along with her earlier albums.

Anna Rubin is an associate professor of music at the University of Maryland/Baltimore County (UMBC). Her compositions encompass